

I Know it Seems Far, but Just Be Where You Are

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I Know it Seems Far, but Just Be Where You Are

by [PrettyLittlePoutyMouth](#)

Summary

Sam's arrival in Los Angeles changes everything for Cat, including the dynamics of her friend group, especially when it comes to Tori and Jade. Meanwhile, Sam struggles to leave behind her past and start something new. Lunacy becomes their new normal.

Notes

This is Part 2 of what will be a series taking place in the same universe as You be the Moon(...). It's finished and will be posted on a schedule (once or twice a week?) and the series will contain 4 parts total.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Flower

Cat knows right away that Sam is special.

It's not just because of her webshow stardom—though Cat certainly recognizes her from that. It's not just because of her motorcycle, her wild hair, her leather jacket, or even the way she jumps into a trash truck to save Cat like some kind of a badass movie hero (which, Cat guesses, makes her a damsel in distress, even though at the time she finds the whole situation hilarious).

It's because of all of those things, and more.

Cat figures it's fleeting. Sam is a celebrity, albeit not one with the kind of status that means much in a town like Los Angeles. But she has her motorcycle and the whole country to explore. There's no reason for her to stay, and Cat doesn't expect her to.

So when Sam does decide to stay and be Cat's new roommate, it comes as a total shock, but an extremely welcome one.

Cat knows Sam is special from the moment they meet, waist deep in garbage, but in spite of the instant connection she feels, there is no way for her to guess just *how* special Sam truly is. At least, not yet.

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[A postcard of a photograph of the skyline of Yakima, WA, with text on the front that reads "You're always home in Yakima!"]

Carly,

First stop was here, stayed with your grandpa, he asks a lot of questions. Remember when you almost had to go live with him? ~~You fought to stay with me that time.~~ Anyway, the bike feels great, like freedom. I can't believe you're already so far away. I miss you.

—Sam

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The first couple of nights after Sam officially moves in, she sleeps on the fold-out couch (alone, this time, since there's no real reason for Cat to join her) but Cat is so excited to see her every morning that she can't help but wake her up. Sam's automatic response is to tackle Cat, which Cat is kind of used to from sleepovers with Jade. A small price to pay for having Sam awake and talking with her before Cat has to head off to school.

As much as Cat is fascinated with Sam, she knows enough about her to assume they don't have much at all in common. But hearing that Sam loves Cat's own favorite show, *That's a*

Drag, makes her look at Sam in a new light. She can see Sam assessing her in much the same way. Maybe they have *one* thing in common but...maybe Cat also shouldn't read *too* much into it.

Cat heads to school, thrilled with the new connection she's made with her new roommate, the webshow star who traveled the country and somehow ended up eating ribs on the foldout sofa in Cat's apartment. Because, oh yeah, without Nona there...it kind of *is* Cat's apartment now.

It's a lot to consider, her new apartment and her busy weekend, but Cat falls into her school day as if it were like any other. There's something about Sam that makes Cat want to keep her to herself. Not like a *secret*. Cat isn't any good at keeping those; they excite her too much and tend to burst out of her without her control. But no, as much as Sam's presence in her life excites her, Cat keeps her close to her chest. At least for now.

She honestly thinks it will be harder *not* to talk about Sam that first day back at school after Labor Day. Any questions about her holiday weekend or her morning or what was new...how could she not talk about her new friend who is back at her home attending online school in her living room?

But no one asks her about those things. Andre asks her if she'll collaborate on a song with him (Cat is delighted to). Beck mentions an audition for a movie he has coming up (Cat congratulates him). Robbie asks if she likes his new glasses (Cat prefers his old pair, but lies and says she likes them). Jade complains about people who walk too slowly in the halls (Cat listens, but doesn't have much to add).

But then at the end of the day, Tori asks Cat what her plans are for the evening, and Cat almost bursts with the effort of not shouting that she is going to go home and see what her new friend and roommate Sam is doing. But she holds back. "Oh. Nothing much," she says airily. "I'll do my homework, see what's on TV."

Tori nods sympathetically, "I bet your Tuesdays aren't going to be the same without *That's a Drag*, huh?"

Cat's body freezes. "What?" she asks, her voice dropping significantly.

Tori frowns. "I thought you knew. The show's been canceled." Tori says more, but Cat can't hear it. She also can't see Tori anymore, with the way her tears cloud her vision.

Cat's devastation is mostly the loss of her favorite show. But there's also a sense, deep inside of her, that there will be nothing left for her and Sam to talk about without the one thing they have in common. And growing closer to Sam feels more important to her than anything.

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[A postcard showing a photograph of tall evergreen tree trunks against the bright horizon with the text: "Greetings from Idaho!" from the Idaho Panhandle National Forests]

Passed through here and it reminded me of our search for Bigfoot. I still don't know if I believe it but you might be onto something. Even on the road, on my bike, there were moments where it felt very possible...but possibility doesn't mean something is real. You and I both know that.

Sorry

Sam

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It turns out that the canceling of *That's a Drag* changes some things.

Sam manages to get her hands on all the furniture from the set and redecorates the apartment. It's not Nona's apartment anymore. It's *theirs*. And Cat feels the difference right away.

She loves that Sam made them a *home*.

And more than that, Cat realizes that she loves *Sam*.

It feels like it barrels into her, almost knocking her over with the force of it. A groundswell of love, pulling at her, surrounding her, becoming her. All Sam wanted was to make her feel better and stop crying, and Cat's heart sings with the gesture.

Cat's been here before. She fell for Robbie when he did something similar, when he sang a song he'd written for her when she was sad. But even though she's still getting to know Sam, this feels more powerful, deeper, more *primal*.

Cat loves Sam, and has no idea what to do about it.

She wonders if it might go away. Sometimes her feelings are so strong one minute, only to fade with time. That happened with Robbie, too.

So Cat takes a deep breath, and tucks away her feelings in her chest, *not* like a secret, but like something just for her.

Like Sam.

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[A postcard from Butte, Montana, that reads "Greetings from Butte" where the lettering for Butte is huge, and each letter is filled with a different painting of a natural attraction or city skyline in the area]

Had to get the postcard with the biggest butte, just for you, haha. I know how you're supposed to say it but I kept laughing at the town name and I knew if you were here, you would too. So from my butte to yours: I hope you're happy.

—Sam

Sam becomes a bigger and bigger part of Cat's life as they continue to live together, start their babysitting service, and even begin sharing a bedroom. It's to the point that Sam *is* a secret now, but one that Cat isn't excited to tell. Because she's realized that the reason she wants to keep Sam close to her chest is not just because she loves her. It's because, selfishly, she actually *doesn't* want Sam to meet her friends. In part it's because Sam is so mean she worries her friends won't like her, and Cat thinks her heart might break if some of her closest friends, her school friends, were to think poorly of her roommate. Well, to be fair, Tori probably wouldn't bat an eye, considering the fact that she was never even a little bit afraid of Jade and they've been dating for almost six months now. But in her case, Cat is maybe a little afraid that Sam might like Tori more than she likes Cat.

She also worries about what might happen if Jade and Sam ever meet. One wrong word from either of them and violence could erupt.

So Cat keeps her life at school and her life at home as separate as she possibly can. The closest she ever comes to saying anything is to Jade, when she admits that Nona had moved to Elderly Acres and mentions that she has a roommate who is around their age instead of living with her grandmother. Jade seems curious and a little concerned, but doesn't ask a lot of questions.

Life with Sam is never boring, though, whether they're wrangling kids to make money, getting revenge on evil British children, helping their young neighbor Dice with his latest entrepreneurial endeavor, cheering on Goomer (an MMA fighter who Dice manages) at fights. Or even just spending their evening on the couch together, watching TV while Sam eats all the popcorn in record time if Cat doesn't take the popcorn bowl away from her.

The first several weeks they live together, Cat begins to expect that Sam will be there when she arrives at home, that she and Sam will spend their evenings together, like they always do. Sam goes to school from home, they work out of their home, and if she goes anywhere, it's usually with Cat on the back of her motorcycle, giggling at the rush of air past her face, arms wrapped securely around her waist.

Which is why it's so surprising when Cat comes home from school one day to find out that Sam is "going out" for the evening.

"Wait, where are you going?" Cat asks. She's surprised, but her voice comes out almost suspicious.

"I told you. Out," is all Sam says. She's short, but not curt, simply direct, the way she so often is.

"But," Cat starts. "Then, can I come with you?" Her tone is almost a whine, because she's just so *bewildered*.

"No," Sam says immediately, emphatically, shaking her head. "No, I just...need to be by myself for a while," she explains. Blue eyes, bright in their intensity, meet hers. "Don't

worry. Nothing's wrong, I'm..." Sam shrugs, eyes dropping, and appears to reach her limit of what amounts to vulnerability, for her. "I'll be back later."

There's nothing Cat can say in response to this, she just watches as Sam steps out onto their patio and begins walking her motorcycle to the alley behind their building. Cat is beyond curious where Sam is going; if there's anything more difficult for Cat than keeping a secret, it's feeling like someone is keeping a secret from *her*, and she can't help that her mind fixates on Sam's behavior, evaluating it, trying to figure out where she might be going.

She'd been dressed casually, in a faded old t-shirt, jeans, and her leather jacket. But then, Cat has no idea what it might look like if Sam dressed up for something. She always wears basically a variation of this same kind of outfit, maybe swapping out shorts and leggings for the jeans, or a sweater for the t-shirt, or a hoodie for the jacket. She hadn't even dressed any differently for the texting competition she'd just participated in the other week. Not that there was any need to, but Cat, at least, always takes any opportunity to wear a dress. Though in her opinion, even her more casual outfits are very put together.

But Sam is the opposite, and so, her attire gives Cat no clues as to her destination as she works on her homework, cooks dinner (she makes extra, in case Sam is home in time for dinner, but she isn't, and eventually Cat is forced to put the leftovers away in the fridge), and then watches some TV alone until she gets tired. She tries to watch only reruns, because she doesn't want to watch anything new without Sam.

Cat is surprised and a little concerned that Sam isn't home when she goes to bed, but Sam is sometimes awake later than she is, and Cat has been so bored flipping through reruns without Sam that she is actually turning in a little early, even for her. She figures she'll hear Sam come in at some point during the night, and snuggles down into her new bed in their recently renovated shared bedroom, comforted by the stuffed animals that nestle against her and the pink comforter that surrounds her.

Cat was right that she would wake up when Sam came into the bedroom. What she was wrong about was that it would be at night.

It's morning. Cat can tell that because of the sunlight coming in through the window next to Sam's bed, but it isn't very bright out. Without looking at her clock, Cat guesses it's probably around when she would have to wake up for school if it weren't a Saturday. But there is Sam, wearing the same clothes she'd been wearing the night before, moving quietly through the bedroom.

"Sam?" Cat asks groggily.

Sam goes still for a brief moment, then turns to Cat, "Hey, sorry," she murmurs. "Didn't mean to wake you."

"What time is it?" Cat asks.

"I dunno, maybe 7:30?" Sam guesses.

Okay, so a little later than Cat thought. She stares at Sam and blinks in confusion. “When you said you were going out last night, I didn’t know you meant *all night*.” Cat can’t help that her voice sounds a little accusatory. She’s too tired to reign in her feelings. And her feelings are that, selfishly, she hates to be apart from Sam, and she *especially* hates feeling like Sam is keeping a secret from her.

“I wasn’t out all night,” Sam says guilelessly, blue eyes catching Cat’s momentarily before dropping to where she’s kicking her boots off. Her makeup is smudged, and her face looks dirty.

Cat frowns, because despite Sam’s apparent honesty, she looks...*very* clearly like she is just coming home as she takes off her jacket and boots. “Then why are you still dressed like you were out all night?” Sam doesn’t answer right away as she strips off her t-shirt and flings it onto what Cat calls her “laundry chair” next to her bed, since it’s always covered in clothes, both clean and dirty. Cat takes in the contours of muscle on her back, noticing some leaves in Sam’s hair. Her forearms are dirty, like she’s been gardening, and Cat notices what looks like a scrape on one shoulder that disappears under Sam’s bra strap. Instead of waiting for Sam to answer, Cat asks, “What happened to your shoulder?”

“Huh?” Sam cranes her neck, as if trying to see. “Oh, I dunno, must’ve bumped into something,” she mumbles dismissively as she quickly unhooks her bra and pulls on a tank top to sleep in, back carefully turned toward Cat. Then, without waiting for Cat to prompt her, Sam answers the first question Cat asked. “And I got home late last night, so I fell asleep on the couch for a while. Just woke up and wanted to get in bed.”

“Oh, okay.” Cat accepts the information, reasoning that Sam slept on the couch until recently, when they moved together into their shared bedroom, so maybe she was just so tired she did what came naturally to her in the moment. Maybe she was even so tired she slept in her shoes. It wouldn’t be the first time she fell asleep on the couch wearing shoes. She watches as Sam kicks off her jeans to pull on her turtle pajama pants. Cat notices she leaves her socks on, which she knows Sam doesn’t normally do to sleep. “Did something happen to your motorcycle?” she asks.

Sam glances over her shoulder, making brief eye contact with Cat, her brow furrowed in confusion. “No. Why?”

“It just looks like you might’ve been on the ground.” Cat gestures to Sam’s dirty arms and the leaves in her hair. “I thought you might’ve had to fix something on the roadside.”

Sam just laughs, though there really isn’t any humor in it. “Oh, nah, motorcycle’s fine, everything’s fine. I’m tired. Goodnight,” Sam effectively closes out the conversation, flopping onto her bed.

Cat is still trying to figure out why none of this seems to add up when Sam starts snoring.

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[A postcard for Buffalo, WY, showing a black and white photo of a small city street scene from decades ago, labeled “Main Street”]

Not much going on around here. The town still doesn't look much different from this postcard. But I wanted to send you one from here too. I'm starting to realize that, if I think ahead just a little, I might be able to hit all fifty states. And if I keep buying postcards, it'll be like I'm taking you with me. Guess that's the best we can do.

—Sam

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Sam sleeps in late the next morning. Late even for her, which is saying something. It's early afternoon when she finally rolls out of bed and Cat hears the shower running. The coffee Cat brewed that morning (mostly for Sam, since Cat usually doesn't have more than one cup and half of that is milk) has long gone cold as the automatic warmer shut off beneath the carafe hours ago. Cat had waited to make lunch, and she's hungry, and she's sure Sam must be too.

Sam catches sight of her where she's sitting in their dining nook, doing homework, as she walks into the kitchen, fully dressed, hair towel-dried. "Morning," Sam greets in a subdued voice as she heads right for the coffee machine, filling a cup.

"Good afternoon," Cat replies pointedly, watching as Sam takes a sip of her coffee and grimaces, eyeing it in dissatisfaction before sticking it in the microwave. Cat speaks louder to be heard over the whirl of the appliance as it reheats Sam's coffee. "You slept a lot. Are you feeling okay?"

"What?" Sam asks.

Cat stands up to move closer so she can repeat the question, but Sam doesn't reply or look at her, she's too focused on watching her coffee spin in the microwave. "Sam," Cat prompts when the silence stretches.

"Huh?" Sam blinks at her, then seems to register the question Cat had previously asked. "Oh, yeah, I'm fine. Kept having weird dreams last night so I guess I didn't sleep that great for most of the night."

"Oh, okay." There's still *definitely* something off about all of this, but nothing about Sam seems suspicious or dishonest. Well, nothing except *everything* about this situation, but Sam has an answer for everything. Cat elects to just take her at her word, for now. "Would you like some breakfast?" Cat asks.

Sam groans in pleasure. "I *need* breakfast," she moans, rubbing at her stomach.

It makes Cat smile. "I'll make you something."

"You're the best." Sam flops onto the couch with her hot coffee.

The next several weeks are busy for Cat, as the school semester begins to pick up, with auditions and song performances alongside the usual essays and tests. But Sam is a constant, always waiting for her at home, always by her side as they tackle their equally busy home life. Their babysitting business has really started taking off, and they face a couple of bizarre

challenges: a rival babysitting business that turns out to be a cover for a toddler climbing ring, another showdown with evil British children, an accident-prone child who somehow injures himself several times in their care.

But as constant as Sam is, and as happy as Cat is with the domesticity inherent in their home life, occasionally, life is pretty weird, like, weirder than the regular adventures they tend to find themselves on. Like the time Sam finally cracks the code on the safe in their closet and they discover a secret room in their apartment.

Just before Halloween, however, Cat comes home from school to discover that Sam is, yet again, intending to “go out” that evening.

“Where are you going?” Cat asks again. It’s an automatic inquiry, and one she doesn’t really expect Sam to answer, given how vague she’d been the last time this had happened a few weeks ago.

Sam doesn’t even address the question, merely says, “I’ll be out late, I’ll probably be home after you’re asleep.”

“Okay,” is all Cat can think of to say, though to her, it doesn’t feel like it’s okay at all. It feels like something *is* wrong, and Sam just doesn’t want to tell her, and that hurts.

Cat can’t help but think back to the last several days as her mind dwells on Sam’s absence as she spends an evening by herself. It seems obvious enough that Sam just...needs to get away from her every once in a while, right? She tries to think. She knows that she and Sam had disagreed about babysitting Oscar, the accident prone child who had injured himself several times in their care. Sam had, at first, wanted to follow Oscar’s mother’s rules to the letter, but Cat had pushed, wanting Oscar to enjoy some new experiences. Cat knows how important it is to try new things; she’s often thought that if she went to a regular high school and not Hollywood Arts that she’d be so *sad* and *normal*. But Cat’s weird. And she knows she’s weird. And she appreciates being in a place and with people who embrace her weirdness. Usually.

Sam had given in to Cat’s insistence that Oscar be given the chance to break through some of the restrictions his mother placed on him, and it hadn’t gone well for poor Oscar. But though Sam had shrugged it all off when Oscar’s mother came to pick him up, Cat wonders if maybe Sam isn’t a little bit upset with her. She’d been a little different the past few days. Sam, who could usually lay motionless on a couch for hours, had been antsy the last couple of evenings they’d spent at home together, had been quieter than usual.

Maybe Sam just gets sick of her sometimes. Cat knows she can be a lot. Maybe she is too much. Maybe even someone like Sam, who is always game to follow along with whatever wild idea occurs to Cat, has her limits.

Cat pushes the thought aside, refusing to break her own heart, when only Sam could really do that for her at this point.

Because, oh yeah, Cat’s feelings haven’t faded in the slightest in the almost two months since Sam had redecorated their apartment.

Sam was correct, since by the time Cat goes to bed, she's still not home. Cat wonders whether this time Sam will come into the bedroom and actually wake her up in the night.

She doesn't, and Cat wakes up several times, expectant, eyes moving for the bedroom door, for Sam's bed, for the bathroom door, each time anticipating that she will be home. But she never is.

Cat's alarm goes off for her to wake up for school after her restless night alone, and as she gets up to head for the bathroom to get ready, she realizes Sam isn't in the bedroom.

Maybe she did fall asleep on the couch last night. Cat skips the bathroom and walks quickly out of the bedroom to the living room.

As she passes the patio, she can already see that Sam's motorcycle is gone. Heart sinking, she leans over the back of the sofa, just to be certain.

No Sam.

It's all Cat can do not to cry, to wonder if Sam just *isn't coming back* this time. Cat knows she doesn't *have* to. Legally, this is still Nona's apartment, and Nona isn't Sam's grandmother; Nona and Sam don't even really seem to get along that well. And Cat knows who Sam is, the kind of person who traveled the United States on a motorcycle without any apparent destination in mind.

Maybe it's inevitable that Sam will someday move on from Cat, too.

Cat takes a deep breath, tries to rationalize this. Sam hadn't packed a bag. Even though she traveled light, there are a few things Cat is pretty sure she wouldn't leave without. And the refrigerator is still well-stocked.

So Cat tries to push her worries and fears out of her mind as she prepares for school.

And just as she's about to leave on her pink bicycle, there's Sam, parking her motorcycle on the patio, looking the same as she did last night, but also looking like she hasn't slept at all. The look is amplified by the fact that her face is free of makeup, allowing Cat to clearly see the dark circles under her eyes. Huh. Cat is certain she'd been wearing makeup when she left the house last night.

Sam freezes for just a moment as she sees Cat through the patio door, but then she pushes her way into the house, "Hey," she says quietly, and as her eyes, warm like a midsummer sky, settle on Cat, Cat can see the way her mouth pulls into an involuntary smile.

"You're back," Cat breathes, more relieved than anything else. In fact, being faced with Sam, who, in spite of her evident exhaustion, just looks *happy*, makes Cat feel happy for her.

"Yeah, uh, I guess I was out longer than I thought I'd be." Sam offers a rueful grin.

"So you were out all night," Cat states. "On purpose," she guesses.

"Yeah," Sam admits, grin vanishing.

“Were you out all night last time too?”

Sam hesitates for a long moment, but finally repeats, “Yeah.”

The silence between them stretches, the *Why?* that Cat refuses to voice hanging in the air between them, but Sam just awkwardly hunches her shoulders, and can’t hide the way her clean, makeup-free face seems to glow, as if she has been rejuvenated by her night away from home. Cat notices she looks a little cleaner and more put together in general than when she’d come home in the early morning hours last time. But there’s no apparent forthcoming explanation for that or anything else.

Finally, Cat just says, “I have to go to school, I’ll see you tonight,” and hurries off.

She decides, in the moment, that she isn’t going to press Sam. It’s clear there is something going on, some reason that Sam has to go away every once in a while. But she came back. In spite of Cat’s fears, Sam came back.

Cat decides that if Sam has a secret, she isn’t going to pry it out of her. All she can do is wait for Sam to trust her enough to tell her.

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[A postcard with the text “Greetings from Valentine Nebraska” with a heart on each side, surrounded by photographs of farmland and nature from the area]

This place is cute for being so boring. Guess it’s no surprise I wanted to send you a postcard from here. Also, already realized my mistake on that last one. I know I can’t see all fifty states. But I can see the forty eight that I can reach. And I will. And so will you.

<3, Sam

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Sam knows that she can never explain it to Cat, but she *needed* to get out of the house for the night. She’d hoped, despite knowing it couldn’t happen, that she would manage to make it home before Cat woke up for school, or that Cat might not notice she wasn’t home yet. In the light of day, Sam knows it was foolish to think she could pull it off, but she hadn’t been thinking clearly. She’d tried to stay home for as long as she could, but by the time that Tuesday had rolled around, she hadn’t been able to wait anymore. She *had* to get away.

But, she knows, it had been worth it. Her night out had felt *great* and she returned home feeling more...settled, within herself.

And now she has to face the consequences.

Sam knows she can’t tell the truth. But that’s fine, because she’s a good liar. She always has been. And so far, Cat hasn’t noticed the *other* times she’s lied to her, about this very thing.

Keeping this secret is important. That goes without saying. She'd only ever revealed her secret to one other person in the world, and she can't imagine ever being so close to someone else again to be able to be that vulnerable. Not after what happened.

Sam goes into their bedroom and passes out in her bed after Cat goes to school. Sam *should* be in school, too, in theory. But school has never been that important to her. Most of the time, back in Seattle, she only showed up because she knew Carly would be there. Hanging out with her best friend all day was about the only appeal school had, and the fact that Carly helped her pass all her classes was just a bonus.

There is no appeal to school at all anymore, but Sam still goes most of the time, if only because she doesn't want Carly to feel like all the effort she put into getting Sam to senior year was wasted.

Not today, though. Today Sam sleeps through the entirety of her school day, and wakes up a little before Cat comes home from Hollywood Arts. Just enough time to have some coffee and breakfast and face the probability that Cat is going to ask *questions*. Which, she knows she owes Cat *some* answers. She has a good thing going, living here in Los Angeles with Cat, making enough money together to get by.

Not to mention the fact that Cat makes her laugh every day, always keeps good food in the house, and is genuinely concerned about Sam's wellbeing. No, it's about more than just losing a good situation. Sam *likes* Cat, a lot. Enough so that it makes it difficult to lie to her, even when it's necessary. Not, like, that the lying itself is hard. The feeling in Sam's stomach afterward is what's hard.

She hears Cat come home and park her bike on the patio, and she comes into the apartment, "Hi, I'm home from school!" she greets merrily.

"Hey," Sam offers a nod. She watches Cat, taking a slow sip of coffee, as Cat puts down her bookbag.

Cat seems to notice her watching, and smiles, eyes twinkling. "Are you ready?" she asks.

Sam blinks, lowers her coffee cup. "For...what?" she asks.

"For *Halloween!*" Cat gushes. "I have my *I Dream of Jeannie* costume all ready to go, what are you going to be?"

"Uhh." Sam hadn't really thought about it. Sam likes Halloween but it isn't like she has anywhere to go in costume. Besides, she's been *distracted* the last couple of days. "I guess I didn't really plan anything."

Cat frowns. "You're not dressing up?"

"I didn't say that," Sam says quickly. "I can pull something together. For Halfoween this year, I was a bottle of hand sanitizer," she says proudly. Cat looks confused, so Sam explains, "Halfoween. Like, Halloween in April because it's half a year away from Halloween."

Cat's face brightens. "I love that! Halfoween," she giggles, seeming to take that in, but then her eyes shift back to Sam as her brows crease, expression somewhere between concerned and disappointed. "But a bottle of hand sanitizer? That's...a choice. Sam, you don't have much time to decide! Halloween is *tomorrow*! And I can't be seen with a bottle of hand sanitizer!" She lowers her head, bats her eyelashes contritely. "No offense."

"Eh, don't worry about me." Sam waves a hand. "I'm sure I have plenty of options in my closet. Or yours," she adds as an afterthought. "We're similar enough sizes. Mostly." She gestures to her own chest.

But Cat gasps, a revelatory sound. "Sam, *that's it!* You can dress up as *me!*"

Sam's mouth just drops open. "As *you?*"

"Yeah! You can wear my clothes, I have a wig you can borrow--"

"Wait, you have a *wig?*"

"It's technically my friend Tori's," Cat explains briefly, but then pushes on in a rush, "And then you can do my *voice!*"

"You want me to *talk* like you?"

"Yeah!" Cat gushes.

It sounds ridiculous, to be honest. But Cat is so *endearing* with her bright, eager smile, and really, she'd just planned Sam's whole costume so she didn't have to. The easiest thing is to say yes. So Sam does.

She also realizes that Cat hasn't asked her anything about the obvious fact that she was out all night and had lied about it. But Sam certainly isn't going to remind her. Maybe Cat is so excited about Halloween that she'd forgotten, at least for now.

Feeling lucky, Sam looks forward to Halloween when, it seems, she'll be dressing up as her roommate.

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[A postcard that says "Greetings from South Dakota!" over a photograph of the Mt. Rushmore monument]

Picked this up in a little town called Plankinton. It made me think of Plankton from Spongebob. There's something so breathtaking about all this open land. It stopped being boring and started being just...wild. I can't explain it. It's so different from the city and the forests we know. It's empty, but it's not dead, it's very alive. If you were here I know you'd get it too. ~~But you're not.~~

Sam

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Halloween is weird. Not just because Sam *does* end up dressing up as Cat, but because they get paid to babysit a doll. That night, Sam has a strange nightmare about the doll in which it's haunted, but at least it isn't murderous. Just creepy. They also attend a concert in her nightmare and she wakes up wishing that part had been true, at least, instead of the two of them spending the evening sitting around their living room with a doll, watching it uncertainly, wondering why they'd been paid to babysit it.

It was probably an elaborate hoax, to be honest, but the strange man had paid them real money, so Sam supposes it wasn't the worst way to spend Halloween.

Not long after Halloween, though, Cat has an audition with Peezy B. Sam sometimes forgets that Cat's private art school is supposed to help prepare her for a career in entertainment. Not because she's unaware that Cat is talented; she's heard her sing. Cat sings to herself all the time around the house. But because things are so simple and easy between them, the way they make enough by just watching kids, the way they spend most evenings together, the adventures they end up on together, just by being friends. Sam doesn't like to admit it, but she knows what a little fame can be like, the way people expect you to belong to them, to the world, to the public eye. And the idea of Cat belonging to the public, to someone else at large...Sam doesn't like that. She doesn't like the thought that their evenings won't be *theirs* anymore.

She's almost relieved when Cat's audition with Peezy B doesn't go well, except for the fact that he was so *rude* to her, and to Sam (he'd smashed her ping pong ball that Cat had taken for him to sign). Anger wells up in Sam, hot and unhealthy, the kind of anger that had gotten her in trouble many times before. The kind of anger she's discussed with countless therapists and parole officers. There are strategies to handle this kind of anger, she knows that, but right now, she doesn't care. Sam marches down to confront Peezy B himself, to make him pay for making Cat cry. And for smashing her ping pong ball. Sometimes it's really the little things that get under her skin.

Sam figures her revenge will either feel amazing or she might get arrested, but either way, she's prepared to face the consequences. What she isn't prepared for is Peezy B complimenting her, and offering her *very* lucrative work.

Sam isn't about to say no to *that* kind of pay. That's, like, the equivalent of a dozen bratty kids she doesn't have to watch. She isn't even worried about the work so much. With pay that good, who cares what she has to do? It's not like she *loves* kids, but she watches them with Cat because money is kind of important. Well, that and Cat usually manages to make it fun. Cat makes a lot of things fun. It's another reason Sam really likes living with her.

For the week that Sam works for Peezy B, though, things at home...are not fun. It's not that working for Peezy B is *more* fun, it's actually pretty ridiculous and annoying most of the time, essentially being his errand girl. But, you know, money. Cat is making money, too, or trying to, by taking on their babysitting gigs by herself, and that's part of what's so unfun about the situation. Sam comes home to chaos, but not the fun kind of chaos she and Cat get into together. This is more like cleaning up messes. Working for Peezy B is a convenient excuse to avoid it all.

Things come to a head when Sam comes home to find that Cat has hired an assistant for herself, a girl who is there to *replace* Sam.

Something wells up in Sam's chest. Something familiar. Disappointment tightens her stomach, dulled by the years of dealing with constantly being let down by her own mother. But it's more than that. It's a squeezing in her chest. Sam is *hurt*. And she's no stranger to this emotion, either, but it feels...fresher. Harsher. The kind of pain that redoubles when you prod at it, especially when it isn't fully healed.

And like most big emotions, it makes Sam angry. It makes Sam lash out. "I've been at work! Working my butt off all day and night and then I just—I come home to find you here with another girl?"

As soon as it comes out of her mouth, she knows how it sounds. But that doesn't make it any less true.

Cat, who has already expressed frustration and exasperation over the fact that Sam's new job means she's never home, is already shouting back, her own hurt written all over her face.

"Well, what did you expect? You work all the time and I have *needs*!"

Through her own rage, Sam clocks the way *that* sounds, too. But there's nothing funny about the fight they're currently engaged in, or the way they've clearly hurt each other.

Sam hates that this *Mindy* is here, making Cat tea, being there for her in ways she can't. She hates the thought that she could be so *replaceable*, the obvious fact that Mindy is *better* than she is: a better friend, a better babysitter, and if she lived here, she'd clearly be a better roommate.

She has only ever been *best* to one person in her life, and that person is thousands of miles away. It hurts to realize how easy it would be for Cat to find someone better. That she'll never be Cat's *best*.

If she even *wants* to be Cat's best. Because Sam is angry at this part, too. That she feels like she needs Cat so much more than Cat needs her.

Honestly, Sam's instinct is to run, before the overwhelm of her emotions consumes her, and she somehow makes this fight *worse*. But the hurt on Cat's face stops her. She remembers the ache in her chest when she saw Cat cry about the cancellation of *That's a Drag*, the way it felt like something stirring in her empty chest for the first time in a long time. Like a seedling pushing its way up through the soil. Life. Life stirring in a place that had been left barren, cold.

She'd felt it again, beneath the anger, when Peezy B had made Cat cry. And she feels it now, like something pushing back against the squeeze of hurt in her chest, as she takes in the hurt on Cat's face, understands the ways Cat felt abandoned by her.

The only thing keeping her here is that she can't bear to leave Cat hurt. She knows too well what that feels like.

Instead, she releases some of her anger by pinching the pressure point on Mindy's elbow to make her pass out. It doesn't hurt her, but it still feels pretty damn good to watch the girl who loves kids and lives for making tea crumple to their kitchen floor.

But her anger fully dissolves when Cat begins to cry, and the pressure of hurt in her chest fully bursts open, as if the seedling within her abruptly erupts into full bloom.

A knock at the door interrupts them. Peezy B. Who makes fun of Cat *again* and then tells Sam he wants to take her to Acapulco with him to pick up some kind of exotic animal that she'd almost certainly end up responsible for taking care of.

Sam looks at Cat. Who brokenly tells her to just *go*.

Sam has no anger left. Only guilt. "Okay, I quit," she says to Peezy B.

He gets upset. He gets indignant. He begs. Sam is unmoved.

If there's one thing Sam knows, it's that you don't abandon a friend who needs you. And Cat's tears show her that Cat needs her, the way Sam needs Cat.

Maybe Sam isn't so replaceable after all.

After Peezy B finally leaves, Sam can *feel* the way the very air of the apartment feels different, like the air is electric between them. She knows this feeling. It's exhilarating and scary and she can see the affection in Cat's eyes, her delight that Sam chose her, over celebrity, over money.

Sam knows how much it means to Cat. She also knows *why* she did it, and it's about something deeper, more powerful than need.

It's about something Sam isn't ready for yet.

She doesn't know if she ever will be again.

But the seedling in her heart keeps growing, like possibility.

Cat is the most important person in Sam's life right now. And Sam knows her feelings run deep.

She just isn't ready to swim to the bottom of them quite yet.

-

[A postcard with a drawing of a silhouette of a sasquatch holding an American flag with the text Wahpeton, ND]

Carls,

Looks like I'm still in Bigfoot country. Don't worry, I'm keeping my eyes peeled for you, and all my senses. I still can't believe you left this area before we ever officially found

Bigfoot. I can't believe you I just wish you were here with me

Sam

-

November begins with the stress of Sam briefly working for Peezy B, but when Sam quits, Cat can tell that something significant has happened. It isn't named or ever really discussed, but the moment Sam chooses her, Cat feels something like a promise inherent in the action.

Sam, it seems, isn't going anywhere. Sam is going to stay right here, in this apartment, with Cat.

Cat *wants* to believe that the connection she feels with Sam in this moment is something more than friendship, but there's no time to even really bask in the moment: there are kids to babysit, and chicken to heat back up for Sam's dinner.

Cat's imagination is vivid. She knows that. That's why she doesn't read too much into it when things feel like they change, just a little, between herself and Sam after that night. The last thing Cat wants is to imagine that Sam might love her back and ruin everything between them.

Luckily, there are plenty of other things for Cat to pay attention to. School, for one. The fact that it's November and that means Thanksgiving month and that means that Christmas is soon and Cat just really loves holidays.

There's also the day that Cat finds out that Sam has a twin sister. An *identical* twin sister. Who is also her complete opposite.

Melanie doesn't stay long, just enough time to pull a pretty elaborate prank on Cat as revenge for managing to trick Sam; apparently, one thing the twins have in common is a willingness to go *all out* in the name of fun and adventure. When it's all over, Cat *still* isn't sure which twin actually trashed their apartment and, most importantly, kissed her on the mouth. It had to be Melanie, right, since Sam was with her the whole time? Or had Melanie posed as Sam? It's difficult to imagine the demure, sweet replica of her roommate doing all of those wild things. But it isn't any easier to imagine her flawlessly impersonating Sam, either, in a way that Cat, who is trained as an actor, wouldn't even pick up on.

She knows she's only tangling herself in these knots because she *wants* it to be Sam, even though that's not at all how she would want their first kiss to go. But there's no guarantee they'll even *have* a first kiss.

It's all she has, and she tries not to let it mean more than what it is.

Even Sam is excited about Thanksgiving, which isn't much of a surprise, given how much she loves to eat. Not even the prospect of spending the whole day with Nona seems to faze her, and Nona herself is as halfheartedly gracious to Sam as she usually is when she arrives in the late morning to begin working on Thanksgiving dinner, with Cat's help. They'd also invited Goomer, since his family lives across the country, and Dice, though relayed that he is

going to be spending most of the holiday in his own apartment with his mom and his Aunt Fergene.

And it's honestly really great. Cat loves cooking with Nona. She loves when she is able to learn something new, and she's trying to take in everything Nona can share with her about making this kind of feast, because someday, Cat wants to be able to do it by herself, for her own family. It had always been special, gathering at Nona's house for Thanksgiving every year, and Nona always seemed to take such great pride in feeding them all. Cat wants to be able to do that, someday. For her house to be the place where all her loved ones gather.

But, it couldn't happen this year. Because her friends *still* don't know about Sam. Cat has been very careful, to spend time at her friends' houses only, to not invite them to her apartment. It's usually pretty easy, because Tori lives so close to the school and tends to host most of their hangouts anyway. But it's also senior year, so it's not so uncommon for them all to be a little too busy to do much outside of school, anyway. Andre has an internship at RPX Records that eats up a lot of his free time, Beck has been auditioning a lot, trying to make connections with casting directors to have a leg up once he's finished with high school, a few of Robbie's recent comedic SplashFace videos have been gaining a lot of traction, so he's been working to cultivate an online presence. Jade, of course, has been making films for as long as Cat's known her, but it feels like she's rarely without a camera these days, and Tori is splitting her time between an audition strategy similar to Beck's and working to leverage her performance at the Platinum Music Awards to negotiate future relationships with record companies other than Neutronium, since Tori really doesn't want to stick with them. And Tori and Jade, of course, spend pretty much any other free moments together.

Maybe another time, maybe someday Cat will be able to bridge the gap between her home life with Sam and her friends, and all their performing arts training. Because that's the other side of it, too. Sam doesn't know her as a performer. Sam knows she can cook, and clean, and care for children, but Sam doesn't know she can act and sing.

Maybe Sam would love that about her.

But Thanksgiving is lovely. Goomer is appreciative, and even the usual tension between Sam and Nona has been dialed down to something almost pleasant. Cat is sure that food absolutely plays a role here. Sam, she knows, is never one to bite a hand that might feed her, and Nona thrives on the validation that people enjoy her food.

The next week, though, Cat has some special plans. There is to be a Throbbing Moon in the sky, a meteorological event in which the full moon appears to throb in the sky due to some combination of closeness to the earth, air temperature and humidity that Cat doesn't fully understand. But Cat wants to experience it, with her friends, and she plans a menu of her special meatballs, as an homage to the moon.

Her plans are first derailed by Sam eating all of her meatballs. The feast she had prepared for multiple people to enjoy, gone, in one sitting. Then, Cat nearly forgets about the Throbbing Moon when she finds the most *beautiful* shoe in the world in a bush on the street and dedicates her free time to finding the other one, to the extent that she skips school to strategize how she might find this shoe's mate. She and Sam eventually steal the other shoe,

and Cat is able to pull it together enough to throw a Throbbing Moon party for Sam, Nona, Goomer and Dice, complete with delicious meatballs.

When the party's over and Cat is satisfied with both it and her new beautiful shoes, she starts to wonder if maybe there *is* something mystical about the moon, especially when it does something like throbs. Maybe lunacy *is* real, and maybe Cat's obsession with these shoes was a manifestation of that. Maybe some people are just more attuned to the moon. Cat isn't really sure if she believes it, but sometimes, like right now, mystical things seem like the easiest explanation.

Even odder, however, is the fact that Cat wakes up for school in the morning and Sam is nowhere to be found.

Her heart sinks. After they'd finished cleaning up after the Throbbing Moon party, Cat had gone to bed first, which is common for them, especially on school nights. But Sam hadn't given any indication that she was planning to go anywhere that night.

Again, Cat wonders if she is too much. Maybe spending the evening watching the moon with Cat was all Sam could handle, for a while, and she'd gone out to...do whatever it is she does when she stays out all night avoiding Cat.

But when Cat goes to check to see if Sam is sleeping on the couch instead, she notices that her motorcycle is on the patio.

So Sam *hadn't* gone anywhere. Eagerly, Cat looks over the back of the couch, fully expecting to find Sam asleep in her clothes from the night before, maybe with a container of leftovers precariously balanced on her stomach.

The couch is empty.

Now Cat is truly baffled. Sam wouldn't just *walk* away in the night, would she? Sure, they were close enough to walk to Bots if they wanted to, or Elderly Acres, but it isn't as though those places would really offer Sam anything at two in the morning.

Cat spends a moment looking around the front of the apartment, just to make sure Sam hasn't fallen asleep somewhere particularly unusual. She's not in the front closet or in the dining nook or out on the patio chairs or under the desk or even out front in the flower beds. Cat checks the bedroom, just to make sure she hadn't just overlooked Sam in her own bed, but she's not there, so she turns on the bedroom light to really take a good look. No Sam in the closet or on her laundry chair. Cat pushes open the ajar bathroom door. Sam isn't in there, either.

Cat is confused, but she also has to get ready for school. She picks up her PearPhone to take with her into the bathroom while she brushes her teeth.

That's when she realizes she has a text. From Sam. She hadn't noticed it because her phone alarm screen doesn't show notifications.

Cat has to read Sam's text twice before she does anything else.

I'm in the secret safe room

Can you let me out when you wake up?

Cat can't make any sense of this, but at least it solves the mystery of where Sam is. Cat approaches the safe, thinks for a moment, then remembers the code and punches it in. She peers down the crawlspace, squinting into the darkness. "Sam?" she calls.

There's a muffled groan, the sound of movement, and then Sam's voice, sounding exhausted and slightly confused, "Cat?"

"It's me," Cat confirms. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm coming out, hang on."

Cat watches as Sam makes her way through the crawlspace, then slides down out of it to land on her feet in her closet. Cat takes in her appearance. Her clothes, the same clothes she was wearing last night, are disheveled, as is her hair. She also looks as though she'd barely slept.

"Thanks for letting me out, I was kinda worried you would miss my text and I'd be stuck in there until you got home from school," Sam mutters, voice trailing off into a yawn toward the end of the statement.

"I'm glad I saw it, too," Cat replies. "But Sam, *why* were you in there?"

"I couldn't sleep last night. Maybe I was wired from all those meatballs, I don't know, but I was really restless. So I thought I'd go in there and maybe I wouldn't keep you up all night."

Plain and simple, this doesn't make any sense to Cat, and she can't help but verbalize her bewilderment. "But *why* the safe room instead of just the living room? You've never kept me up before."

"Yeah, but...I was *really* wired, Cat. Like, bouncing off the walls. It seemed like it would be quieter in there."

"So you closed yourself in accidentally?"

"No. I needed the safe door shut to muffle the noise I was making."

"What were you *doing*?" Cat is still trying to make sense of this. Sam has done a lot of truly bizarre things in the time she's known her, but nothing like this. Sam usually would rather do nothing than anything active.

"You know. Running around and stuff. I jumped rope in there for a while too."

“Sam this...” Cat takes a deep breath and gathers her thoughts. “I believe what you’re telling me, but this is *weird*. You have to know this sounds weird.”

“I know. But you were weird the past couple of days, too.” Sam raises her eyebrows.

Well. Cat can’t refute that. Her obsessive quest for her other pink shoe had definitely seemed to exasperate Sam at the time.

Maybe it’s just been a weird week. Cat doesn’t press anymore.

“I have to get ready for school.”

Sam nods. “Gotta catch up on the sleep I missed.”

“Did you sleep at all?” Cat wonders.

“A little. But you know there’s nowhere comfortable to sit in there, much less lie down.”

That is true. They’d talked a few times about what they might do with that room to make it more useful or fun, but the fact that the safe door can close and trap people inside makes them both pretty wary of spending a lot of time in there. Except, apparently, on nights when Sam has a lot of energy.

Okay, it’s weird, but ultimately, Cat figures she can’t judge. She’s done some weirder things in her time. She’d tried to live in the catwalks of her school’s theater, spending the night in a secret safe room isn’t that much more bizarre.

And, as the next few days go by, Cat doesn’t think much more about Sam’s night in the secret safe room. Sam herself seems kind of restless the next night, too, but returns to normal quickly afterwards.

And Cat...returns to normal, too. At least in terms of her shoe obsession. She finds that, though she’s happy to have the cute pair of pink shoes, she doesn’t want to wear them much. She supposes maybe it was the pursuit of them that thrilled her, and less the reality of them.

Maybe she was onto something with her ruminations about lunacy. And maybe Sam was experiencing something like that, too.

Cold

[A postcard from Brainerd, MN, depicting a photo of a large statue of Paul Bunyan]

Carly,

Been checking out some parts of this state and I keep seeing stuff about Paul Bunyan around here. This place even has a giant statue of a blue ox. Made me remember that time in third grade when I thought Paul Bunyan was a former president. I'm glad you were there to bail me out. ~~Why aren't you~~ Doesn't Brainerd remind you of Freddie?

—Sam

-

December is a busy month, with the school semester wrapping up and the holidays at the end of the year. Even Sam is buckling down on her online school, actually studying so she can pass her midterms. They still take on babysitting work, because they need to be able to pay rent, but they have little time to do very much that's interesting. The two highlights are when they have to travel to Oxnard to try to have a new word added to the dictionary and when Cat discovers an ATM that malfunctions and spits out cash, which leads to, at first, a great windfall and all sorts of new, fun things in their apartment, but eventually results in them both getting arrested.

Luckily, the arresting officer swallows a bag of sedatives, which wouldn't be lucky at all under normal circumstances, but it allows Sam to take over operating the vehicle, which leads to Sam arresting a wanted criminal, which ultimately allows them to pay back the money that Cat still maintains the ATM *gave* them. They certainly didn't steal it!

Otherwise, December is fairly standard. Except for certain moments, when she and Sam are alone together, when Cat feels something like a static charge in the air.

It starts not long after the night that Sam locks herself in the secret safe room overnight for reasons that still don't make a lot of sense to Cat. As she and Sam buckle down on schoolwork, there are times when they work across the room from each other, often with Cat at the dining nook and Sam on the sofa.

And there are times when Cat will abruptly have her focus pulled from homework by the sensation of being watched. She can *feel* Sam's eyes on her, as surely as she can feel the pencil in her hand, the notebook paper under her fingers.

She glances up, and finds Sam staring at her. Sometimes, Sam seems lost in thought, like she has ended up staring at Cat as her mind wanders, but increasingly, especially after the incident in which they'd both been arrested, she seems to be watching Cat *deliberately*.

Usually, Sam's reaction is just to smile and return her attention to her homework. No explanation offered, or even any awkwardness to the way she simply ceases her staring.

Cat doesn't *mind*, per se, but it does leave her with a giddy sensation in her chest and heat on her face, for reasons she can't even really fully articulate.

It isn't as if staring *means* anything. It's probably just Sam finding distractions from her homework, because even as she attempts to apply herself to school, she's always seeking something else she'd rather be paying attention to. Cat had to convince her that she wouldn't actually accomplish anything if she also had the TV on while she was doing homework and, Cat figures, she *might* be the most dynamic thing in the apartment if the TV isn't on.

But Cat can't help but think that it feels like something is changing in the apartment, when they're alone.

A few weeks before Christmas, as they're assessing their financial situation (i.e. their pineapple full of money), it's clear that what had started out feeling like a financial feast of a month, with the thousands of dollars Cat had been gifted by the Magic ATM, is now going to be kind of tight. They'll manage, that much is clear, but in terms of personal spending, they're on a budget.

Which isn't exactly where Cat likes to be when it comes to Christmas, because she *loves* Christmas, especially gifts, both giving and receiving.

"I guess we'll have to get creative with Christmas," Cat says glumly, looking at the small number Sam has written down that reflects the amount of money she can safely spend this month. Cat wonders how much she can get away with putting on her father's credit card without him noticing. It's supposed to be for emergencies; does Christmas shopping count as an emergency?

"Eh, don't worry about Christmas for me." Sam waves her off. "Let's just make it easy on ourselves and just not do presents this year. We live together, anyway, so giving each other presents is basically a household expense."

"But Sam," Cat frowns. She hates the idea of not giving gifts.

"Hey," Sam says softly, reaching for Cat's hands, and Cat feels her pulse pick up as Sam takes her hands in her own. They touch all the time, but the moments when Sam initiates contact between them make Cat's heart jump into her throat. "We can still make Christmas really awesome and special! We can take a drive to look at Christmas lights, go take a walk on the beach, eat a really delicious special meal at Nona's. Whatever you want. But let's make Christmas about something we *do* instead of something we buy."

Cat pouts about this, until she really begins to consider what Sam is offering. She begins to smile, slowly. "Anything I want?" she asks.

In response, Sam's eyes narrow. "I'm going to regret this, aren't I?"

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[A postcard featuring a photograph of Lake Superior's shoreline in Wisconsin]

Carls,

Saw my first great lake today. It's kind of crazy how it just looks like an ocean. I always thought lakes were supposed to be calm or whatever, but this had waves. It doesn't smell like the ocean though. But being near it made me think of Seattle, and the Puget Sound, and I realized I didn't miss it. I don't think I'm ever going back. Not without you.

—Sam

-

"I can't believe you actually want to do this," Sam mumbles, tugging at the collar on her shirt.

"Christmas Eve is my favorite mass!" Cat insists. She's wearing a dress with a frilly skirt, but unlike most of her dresses, it has a higher neckline and sleeves. It's still pretty cute, though, Sam has to admit. Cat really wears dresses well.

Sam, on the other hand, has been wrangled into a pair of black slacks and a buttoned shirt because Cat insisted she would need to "dress up" for the occasion, whatever that means. At least she isn't required to wear a dress, too. But while Cat had insisted that she would be embarrassed if they were stared at because Sam wasn't dressed properly for church, Sam's own rebuttal that she would be embarrassed if they got stared at because they were dressed like this while on her motorcycle didn't seem to have quite the same effect on Cat.

Sam stares up at the tall steeple on the Catholic church. The building is large, imposing, but not ornate, just plain white against the dark winter night sky. It's unexpected, because Sam always thought churches like this were supposed to be really fancy looking, but this is not. "Come on," Cat urges, tugging at Sam's elbow, "I want to get good seats."

"Good *seats*?" Sam asks incredulously. "It matters where you sit?"

"I mean, not really," Cat admits. "But the pews tend to really fill up for holiday services and I don't want to end up in the very back."

They step inside, out of the cool night air (it hasn't really gotten *cold* in Los Angeles yet, at least, not by Sam's standards), into a warm entryway with stone tile that leads to a large, open set of glass doors flanked by men in suits. Sam can already feel the difference in the air around her, the *solemnity*. There's no better word for it. It's in the hushed tones of the people, shaking hands and wishing each other a Merry Christmas. It's in the organ music that rings out from the sanctuary before her. It's in the formality of every gesture even though everyone is smiling.

It's a lot to take in.

Sam keeps quiet as Cat guides her past the men. One of them tries to hand her a pamphlet, which she tries to refuse on instinct, but Cat flashes him a conciliatory grin and takes Sam's for her. "You need this to follow along," Cat tells her.

“I have to follow along?” Sam asks. “I thought you just like, sat and listened in church.”

“That’s most of it,” Cat admits as she guides Sam down to the end of a pew about halfway to the front of the sanctuary. They’re off to the side, but Sam can see everything up front clearly. She figures Cat might be seating them off to the side so that she can guide Sam through...whatever happens in church. Sam had been forced to go a few times when her mom had been dating a minister, but she didn’t really remember much except being bored. She figures this will be more of the same.

Now that they’re seated, Sam looks around. What the outside of the building lacks in flamboyance is more than made up for in here, with painted ceilings, stained glass, colorful lights illuminating different sections of the stage up front. Even the pews themselves are made of dark, shiny wood with intricate work along the back and at the side, which Sam can see since they’re at the end of a row.

It’s not just the sights of the place, too. Amidst all the whispers of everyone around her, there’s the organ music, thunderous in the echoing space, and Sam catches the cloying scent of some kind of fragrant smoke through the perfumes of the well-dressed ladies settling into seats around them.

“Kinda smells,” Sam mumbles.

Cat frowns, “What do you mean?”

“Like, smoky, I guess.”

“Oh, yeah,” Cat nods, and breathes in deeply. “They always light incense for mass. I always liked the way it smelled.” She smiles softly, takes another deep breath.

“Oh. Huh.” Sam keeps looking around, taking in everything around her. There’s apparent joy in everyone around her, but something about the whole place puts Sam on edge.

“Are you okay?” Cat asks, nudging her slightly.

“Yeah. Sorry. It’s kind of a lot, when it’s new.”

“I always thought it was so pretty in here.” Cat smiles serenely as she leans back in her seat and looks at the pamphlet she was given when they walked in.

Sam stops twisting around in her seat and figures she’ll look, too. Only none of it makes any sense to her. It’s in English, sure, but it’s unfamiliar words, numbers that she can only assume are some kind of code. At least some of the songs she recognizes, regular old Christmas songs like you hear in stores this time of year.

She’s about to ask Cat what on earth half of this stuff means when the lights slowly begin to dim, and everyone around her goes quiet. Sam feels a thrill of fear at the unexpectedness of it, still feeling out of sorts and overstimulated in the space, which makes her anxious, but then Cat grins at her, eyes alight, and Sam relaxes. At least until, abruptly, everyone gets to their feet, so she stands up next to Cat.

In the dimly lit sanctuary, it's difficult for Sam to see past everyone standing around her, but she's able to see enough: men in robes begin to walk down the aisle toward the front of the sanctuary, carrying candles and swinging a metal ball that, yep, is sending puffs of incense around the room. The organ is playing music and people are singing, but Sam can't really make out what the words are as the large group can't really maintain the same pitch and rhythm. Momentarily, Cat nudges her, showing Sam the book she has open, and Sam realizes there notes and lyrics written there.

The men in robes are all at the front, one standing at a podium, the song ends. The priest raises his arms and everyone begins to sit back down, Sam following along, feeling like she doesn't speak a language everyone else around her is clearly fluent in.

That feeling lingers through most of the service. Sam looks to Cat whenever anything seems to be changing. She quickly abandons the little program, because it doesn't help her at all, and just looks at whatever book Cat has open when they're supposed to talk. Except for the times Cat is clearly reciting things from memory, and Sam just listens. At least she knows the other songs they sing, after the first one. Maybe not every word, but she's familiar. It makes her feel for a moment like she isn't completely out of her element.

But it is a lot of sitting and listening, and Sam's mind wanders, wondering what other people enjoy about this.

At a certain point, people start shuffling out of their seats and going up to the front. "What's happening?" Sam asks, because she hasn't been paying attention as some priest droned on and on.

"Eucharist," Cat states.

"Okay, you know that makes no sense to me." Sam is starting to get irritated. Not with Cat, but with the whole situation.

"The priest gives you some bread and wine, which is Jesus's body and blood," Cat explains, in intentionally simple language.

Sam perks up, really only processing the first part of the sentence, "You didn't tell me we'd be getting a snack."

"Oh, we're not," Cat says easily.

"Cat, if there's food in this building, I'm eating it, they've made me sit here for an hour already," Sam says, very seriously.

"You *can't*," Cat hisses quietly. "And neither can I. I haven't been to confession in, gosh, years now."

"Confession is real? I thought that was just a TV thing." Sam digests that. "So you have to go to confession to get the snack?" she asks, realizing what Cat had implied.

Cat nods, “You need to have confessed your worst sins first before you can take communion.”

Sam stares. “What kind of sins would *you* even have to confess?”

To her surprise, Cat blushes. “Everybody sins, Sam,” she mumbles.

The organ is playing and people are singing while they file up front, and Cat opens one of the books in front of her and starts singing along with the organ music. Sam does, too, though she eyes Cat suspiciously.

After everyone else receives their snack and dose of alcohol from the priest, the lights go dim again. Sam is ready for it this time, in fact, she perks up, wondering if this means the service is about to be over.

Instead, she sees candlelight, making its way down all the aisles of the sanctuary, as kids a little younger than her, all wearing black formalwear and carrying small candles, place themselves at roughly even intervals throughout the space. One kid ends up standing right next to where she and Cat are seated.

The room is still and utterly silent for just a moment, and then, following some signal even Sam couldn’t perceive, all of the teenagers begin singing “Silent Night,” completely without accompaniment.

And for the first time, Sam understands some of the appeal of all this, because they sound beautiful.

But it doesn’t last. After the song, the young people with candles walk back out, the lights come back up, and Sam is back to feeling like she’s out of place in a gaudy, boring room.

At least the service is almost over. There’s just a few more long-winded statements by the priest that Sam mostly tunes out and then the organ plays something reverent and soft, and everyone begins to leave.

“It’s over?” Sam confirms. She can’t help how eager she sounds.

Luckily, Cat laughs. “It’s over.” She slips her arm into Sam’s as they walk down the side aisle toward the back. “Thanks for coming with me. I know you didn’t like it much.”

Sam snorts. “It was mostly just really confusing, and yeah, boring,” she explains, but decides she can be honest enough about one thing. “Though the Silent Night thing was pretty cool.”

Cat nods. “They have the Youth Choir perform that every year. That was always my favorite part, singing that song,” she says wistfully.

Sam glances at her. “You were in the Youth Choir?”

“Sure,” Cat says. “I did a lot of singing other places even before Hollywood Arts, but my parents used to take us to church every week, and I liked it, and singing was a way for me to connect, I guess.”

By now, they've reached where the priests are lined up at the exit, shaking people's hands as they leave. Sam keeps her hands in her pockets, just nodding acknowledgement instead, but Cat shakes hands and wishes each of them a Merry Christmas.

One priest, an old man at the very end, says in a quiet voice that Sam can only barely hear, "We've missed seeing you, Catarina."

"I'll be back soon, Father Carlo," she assures him, and moments later, she has her arm looped through Sam's again, and they're through the entryway and pushing outside into the crisp, clear night, sky bright with a waxing moon.

"That priest knew your name," Sam observes, a little surprised by the discovery.

Cat winces. "Now if I ever go to confession again, I'll have to confess to lying to a priest."

"What?" Sam asks.

Cat shrugs. "I won't be back, not anytime soon," she says plainly. "Maybe next Christmas. Maybe Easter. But otherwise?" She shakes her head. "Church isn't the same for me anymore. Not since my parents moved to Idaho to be with my brother. Really, if I think about it, it hasn't been the same since I started at Hollywood Arts. Since I had more opportunities to perform and express myself. And now? Not only am I just too busy, I'd rather spend my time with you."

Something warm bubbles up inside Sam and she blinks and tries to swallow it down. "I don't think I'm a very good substitute for church," she jokes. "I'm surprised I didn't burn up in there."

Cat laughs. "You get in trouble, but you're not *evil*, Sam. But it's also...what's between me and God? That's mine, alone. I don't really need the church anymore. I know what I believe, I know what I value."

They're approaching where they've parked Sam's motorcycle now, and Sam drops Cat's arm to pass her her helmet. And as she pulls her own helmet on, over her head, she hears Cat whisper something else, so quietly Sam almost isn't sure she hears it right.

"And I know what I love."

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[A postcard showing a photograph of a mural with images depicting the four seasons beneath the word Gaylord in stylized street art lettering from Gaylord, MI]

Okay no surprise that I had to buy you this postcard. How do so many towns have such weird names? And people just live here? Went through the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. A lot of lakeside driving, which was really cool, then went over a long bridge to the bottom half of the state. It's weird how things start to change. A couple weeks ago was all mountains and open land but now it's trees and lakes. Guess I'm seeing stuff.

S

Church isn't the only thing Cat wants to do to celebrate Christmas. Though she and Sam don't exchange gifts, they still receive them from other people, so that morning, over coffee and pancakes, they sit on the couch and open presents. Cat's parents and her brother both send her some things from Idaho—practical things from her parents, including some cookware for the kitchen, high quality soaps and cosmetics, and new socks, and some books of sheet music from a few of Cat's favorite musicals from her brother. Nona gives her a recipe book with some of her favorites in it. Dice and Goomer get her a cute Christmas sweater. She and her school friends had exchanged some Secret Santa presents, too, though it was last week, before Christmas break.

Cat is glad that she doesn't have her Secret Santa present to open in addition to the others because Sam's stack of presents is...smaller and much less exciting.

Sam doesn't have anything from any family member except her sister. Cat has only heard her mention her mom before, and it doesn't exactly sound like they get along well, but Cat is still surprised by this. For her, Christmas has always been about celebrating family, even if you have to set aside your differences for a few days to do it.

But it seems like it's not the same for Sam.

Melanie sends Sam a beanie, with a note that she hopes it gets cold enough for Sam to wear it. Nona gives Sam a present, too (a small meat and cheese gift box) and Dice and Goomer get her a big tin of popcorn. Cat is already plotting how she will hide the popcorn so that Sam doesn't eat literally the entire tin over the course of one single movie.

Sam does have one more present, however. Cat points at it. "Who's that from?"

Sam clears her throat. "It's from Carly."

"Oh," Cat nods. "All the way from Italy?"

"No, I, uh." She looks away. "I actually thought it was from her brother. That's what the return label on the package said. He must've sent it to me for her."

Cat waits, but Sam still isn't opening the little present, which is beautifully wrapped in colorful paper. Finally, she prompts, "Don't you want to open it?"

Sam picks it up, and glances at Cat uncertainly for a moment. There is palpable hesitation in her movements.

Cat doesn't exactly understand what is causing Sam's discomfort, but she at least understands enough to offer, "I'll go get us some more coffee." She takes both their mugs into the kitchen, taking her time pouring Sam's black coffee and adding milk and sugar to her own cup. Across the room, she hears wrapping paper tearing.

Cat comes back, still taking her time, giving Sam a chance to compose herself if she needs to. Sam glances up at her. "It's, um. A wallet. Italian leather." She closes the billfold and holds it

up a little for Cat to see.

“Ooh, that’s beautiful,” Cat gushes, because it’s lovely: it looks finely crafted and elegant.

“Yeah,” Sam replies, though without much enthusiasm. She stands up from the sofa. “Guess I’d better go take a shower so we can go have our Christmas day fun, huh?”

“Okay, hurry up!” Cat smiles, setting down the full mug of hot black coffee that Sam is apparently not going to drink just now.

Cat appreciates that Sam had been willing to attend church with her. She hadn’t necessarily expected Sam to enjoy it, but she liked having her there. She really did like the Christmas Eve mass, and it’s awfully lonely attending church by herself. It isn’t the only reason she’d stopped regularly attending (truthfully, even when she still lived with her parents, they had been less interested in weekly attendance once Cat and her brother were teenagers), but it certainly didn’t make it any easier to want to go.

But what she’d told Sam was true. She isn’t really planning to go back anytime soon.

So instead of anything religious, once she and Sam shower and dress, they go out and have fun together. They take a drive all over the city; even Christmas doesn’t fully loosen the tight hold that congested traffic always has over Los Angeles, but Sam is able to navigate most of it with ease on the motorcycle. They end up going to see a movie, one that Cat almost can’t pay attention to because she’s so excited to be there with Sam. Not that she and Sam don’t do almost everything together, but something feels special about seeing a movie together on Christmas day.

The feeling is heightened when they go out for Chinese food after the movie, and though they eat together at Bots *all the time*, this feels different, too.

Maybe it’s just that everything feels magical on Christmas day. Maybe that’s all it is.

But when Cat wraps her arms around Sam’s waist as they head home to take a nighttime walk on the beach before spending the evening on the couch (where Cat has to ration Sam’s popcorn for her), all she knows is that being close to Sam feels exhilaratingly different.

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[A postcard depicting the glass pyramid-shaped building that is the Rock n Roll Hall of Fame with the words Cleveland, home of Rock n Roll from Cleveland, Oh]

C-

Barely passed through Indiana but I think I’ll be back. I was planning to mostly just cruise through Ohio because I really didn’t think there was anything cool here but then I realized I could see the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. Kind of stupid expensive, but worth it. The only crime is that Cuddlefish isn’t in here. ~~This was one place I’m extra~~ angry I can’t share with you. No, wait. I’m not scratching that out. It’s true. I’m angry. And you’re not here.

-S

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It takes Sam two full days to decide to transfer her money and cards and things into her new wallet.

The wallet is beautiful. She misses Carly. These things are both obvious and true. It seems like it would be a no-brainer, with that in mind, to begin using the new wallet right away.

But the truth is, she misses Carly *too* much. It's still painful. And the days when she doesn't have to think about her are the easiest days to get through. That's much harder to do when she's not frequently looking at an object that reminds her of her best friend who is thousands of miles and an entire ocean away from her.

It doesn't help that Carly had the wallet engraved with *Under the same full moon*. If only that was a comfort to her.

It's not.

Three days after Christmas, Sam is feeling so wild and out of control that she *has* to get out of the house. It's been too long. Sam needs a night out.

In the late afternoon that day, Sam rises from the sofa, where she and Cat have been watching (well, Cat has been watching, Sam, less so) Christmas movies. "I'm gonna go out for awhile," she informs Cat with as much nonchalance as she can muster.

She hates the way the light seems to go out of Cat's eyes. "Oh," Cat replies, the single syllable carrying so much weight. But then Cat takes a breath and drags a smile onto her face. "Are you going to be gone all night again?" she asks.

"Something like that," Sam replies, hoping there won't be any more questions.

"Well, okay," Cat's voice matches Sam's own forced nonchalance. "I guess I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yeah, okay. Have a good night."

Cat merely shrugs in response, and Sam goes out to the patio to get on her motorcycle, wincing as she remembers the look on Cat's face.

She hates disappointing Cat. The fact that she'd gone to that boring-ass church service is proof enough of that.

She also hates lying to her.

But it isn't as though she has any other choice, with the kinds of secrets she has to keep.

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[A postcard with a cartoon groundhog with the text “Greetings from Punxsutawney, PA, Home of Punxsutawney Phil!”]

Carly,

Sorry about what I said in the last one. It’s just still hard sometimes. Been traveling through a lot of trees and mountains. Sometimes there won’t be a town for miles. I could get used to living someplace like this, away from everybody else. Most people aren’t worth the time, and the ones that are don’t stick around. Sorry. Maybe I am still a little mad.

Sam

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New Year’s Eve is fun, and Dice, Goomer and Nona all spend the evening with them, though Nona only lasts until about ten o’clock until she can’t stop yawning and heads home to Elderly Acres. But it’s after she helps Cat prepare all the hors d’oeuvres and desserts that they’ve been snacking on all evening, so Sam seems happy enough to shoo her out (Cat should feel guiltier about it, but the wide-eyed, scandalized look Nona gives Sam as she’s quickly ushered out *is* funny).

Dice and Goomer stay long enough to officially ring in the New Year, but Dice is expected home promptly after midnight, and Goomer walks him back to his apartment. And then, Sam and Cat are alone in the apartment together, again.

It’s been like that a lot over the past week or so. They’re both on Christmas break from school, and babysitting has been slow, probably because people are out of town or have time off from work. Dice, Goomer and Nona are liable to drop in regularly, but so much of their life together is the easy domesticity of sharing a home with someone you can be supremely comfortable with.

At least, that’s how it feels to Cat.

She always wonders if it feels the same for Sam.

For now, though, Sam smiles at her as they head over to the kitchen to box up any leftovers that Sam will probably finish eating tomorrow. “Happy New Year, Cat.”

Cat beams back. “Happy New Year! I think this one’s going to be really special.”

“Yeah? Why do you say that?” She’d almost expected Sam to tease her about this kind of optimism, or at least roll her eyes, but there’s a softness in her expression, and her dark blue eyes are curious.

“Well, we’re going to graduate high school this year, for one thing,” Cat starts.

“That’s not a guarantee,” Sam counters.

“Yes, it is,” Cat insists. “For you, too. I saw how hard you worked at midterms.” Sam doesn’t seem to have a response to that, and Cat continues. “And then...college. Or whatever comes after high school. I don’t know. It just feels like it’s going to be a big year.”

“Yeah, you may be right,” Sam muses. “I guess I just hadn’t thought about the future much.”

“I have to,” Cat sighs. “Like when I did my college applications in the fall.”

Sam’s face seems to fall, but she quickly masks it. “Are you going away to college?” she asks. There’s an edge of agitation to her voice.

“No, I applied to local places,” Cat replies. “I want to stay near Nona.” *And you*, she thinks, but she doesn’t voice it.

“Oh, okay,” Sam seems to relax. “That’s cool.”

Cat wants to say something, to reassure Sam that she would never just *leave* without speaking to her. For as much as she worried in the past about Sam deciding to leave her someday, Cat never considered that Sam might be worried about the same thing. “I’d never plan to, like, move away without talking to you, you know,” is what Cat settles on.

“I know,” Sam replies with a weak smile, but Cat can hear the relief in her voice. She seems to hesitate, and finally Sam says, “I’m glad I get to spend this year with you.”

Cat feels like her happiness might bubble over, and she almost just blurts out that she’s *in love* with Sam. But she stops herself. Because as much as she feels ready, she doesn’t think that Sam is ready to hear it.

Cat suspects that Sam might feel the same way. It’s a natural conclusion, though one that she still worries is wishful thinking, but the way it feels when they’re together *seems* like they’re building toward *something*.

But she also knows that there are things Sam is holding back, herself. And not just because she sees her leave the apartment all night every month or so without offering any explanation.

It’s not the right time. Not when the entire framework of their domestic bliss is built upon the shaky framework of secrets. The ones Sam keeps from her, and the ones Cat keeps to maintain a separation of her home life from her school life.

But Sam’s words still make her grin from ear to ear, and her face feels hot.

“We’re going to have the best year together,” she promises Sam.

Sturgeon

[A postcard with the text “Greetings from Utica, New York,” in which Utica is written in large letters with the image of the city skyline within the letters]

Carly

You and I have both been to New York City, and let me tell you, the rest of the state is nothing like it. Weirdly, I kind of feel like I might fit in here. People just seem to mind their own business, so little of that fake nice you see so many other places. I don’t know. The trees and mountains are different here. I can’t explain what I mean but you’d get it.

Sam

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In spite of Cat’s optimism, the start to the new year is a little shaky. It’s always difficult to go back to school after a break, even when you really like school (which Cat definitely does). She loves being back at Hollywood Arts with her friends, but it’s the last semester of senior year, and that makes some of the classes just feel like a slog to get through.

Luckily, babysitting picks up, which means she and Sam stay busy, and also means they’re making money. The downside to that is fewer evenings at home alone together, and that their days for the first few weeks of January are pretty rote, repetitive, without a lot of weirdness and adventure.

All of this is quite manageable, of course. Just because things are a little boring doesn’t mean things are bad. But toward the end of the month, Cat feels like things begin to unravel, and she begins to worry that this is *not* going to be the wonderful year she’d predicted.

It all starts when Jade shows up at her apartment one afternoon to work on a school project. Without being invited. Cat honestly had forgotten that Jade knows where she lives, which, of course she does, she helped Cat move in with her Nona last spring.

Cat tries to force her to stay outside, because she is just *not ready* for her worlds to collide. *Especially* not with Sam meeting Jade. She would have preferred that the first friend of hers from school that Sam might meet would be Andre, who everybody likes, or Beck, who would just be completely unfazed by Sam even if she did hate him.

But not Jade. Cat is afraid the inevitable friction between Sam and Jade might ignite like a gas explosion.

What she is not prepared for is the reality that Sam and Jade *immediately get along*.

At first, it’s a relief, that there isn’t a devastating fight that she has to deal with the painful aftermath of. Cat is happy for them both that they seem to see each other as kindred spirits, though she notices that both of them seem to be playing up their level of cruelty and

animosity toward people in general. She's happy to let them have their fun up until it spills over onto her, and the two of them leave the apartment together, leaving Cat behind.

Okay. That stings.

Cat tries to keep up with them, wanting to hang out with Sam, who she loves very much, and Jade, her oldest friend. But it's as if they've both forgotten about her entirely.

The feeling only intensifies when Cat realizes a few days later that Sam and Jade have begun to just like, hang out. Regularly. Without her.

Cat can't help but remember her fear, early on, that Sam might meet Tori and like her more than she likes Cat. It had seemed like a silly fear even at the time, especially given that Tori and Jade were clearly very happy together and it did not seem at all likely to Cat that Tori would want to run away with Sam.

With Sam and Jade though...Cat doesn't *think* there's anything romantic going on between them, but their sudden closeness, the way they laugh together (when they're both usually too closed-off to laugh so much in public), the fact that Tori isn't around...that gives Cat pause.

And it makes Cat *incredibly* jealous.

It's another one of those emotions that slams into her like a freight train rather than sneaking up on her. She's been by Sam's side for *months* now, slowly building intimacy with her, when Sam so often feels like a fortress, or some kind of skittish animal, closing off or shrinking away from most forms of vulnerability. And Jade just *swooped* in on Sam, primed by all of Cat's work to accept companionship, friendship, maybe more, and Sam, apparently, only has room for one person at her side.

Cat is jealous, and hurt, and angry, and when her emotions take control, there isn't much she can do about it. She immediately plots a way to make *Sam* jealous of *her*. Or *for* her.

She doesn't really have the capacity to think through this plan, or to even really think what kind of jealousy she wants to provoke. She just knows she wants to strike back. She wants to make Sam feel like she's feeling right now.

So Cat steals Sam's phone and calls Freddie Benson.

His is the first human name she sees in Sam's phone, which is mostly filled with restaurants. And, when she has time to think about her decision, she realizes he is a diabolical choice. She knows that Carly is Sam's best friend, but Carly lives in Italy. Freddie is the other friend from Seattle that Sam was close to, back when she lived there, and Cat had heard Sam mention in passing that they had some sort of romantic history. Cat remembers that she grimaced as she said it, so it didn't seem likely that Sam still felt the same way now, but since it isn't like Carly is likely to jump on an expensive international flight, Freddie is the next best choice.

It doesn't hurt that Freddie is *cute*. Sure, Cat has been dealing with her private, deep, and powerful feelings for Sam for a few months now, but it doesn't mean she doesn't have eyes, and Freddie is not only well-groomed, but also in shape, though also kinda nerdy. He reminds

her of Robbie, but less awkward. Well, only a little. The longer she spends time with him, the more awkward he seems, in his own way.

And when Sam and Jade find Cat and Freddie out to lunch together, Cat is delighted by the way Sam reacts, clearly ablaze with jealousy, and it seems to be *Freddie* she's angry with. It's certainly him that she shoves back into his seat and yells at, though she's kind of yelling at Cat, too. She's *clearly* unhappy to see them together, and Cat feels a fierce delight. Yeah, Sam, how does it feel to have a friend stolen?

Cat drags Freddie away to tour the LA freeways with her, an adventure that takes hours because of all the traffic, and by the time they make it home, Robbie is there.

It's a detail that takes a moment to register, as Cat walks to the front door with Freddie, preparing for another round of fiery jealousy from Sam, but instead, as they're talking outside the apartment, she hears the sweet, melodic sound of Robbie's voice, singing along with his guitar.

Singing a song he wrote for *her*.

Cat might not be in love with Robbie anymore, but that doesn't mean she lacks affection for him, and it certainly doesn't mean she's forgotten what that song means to her, the song that made her fall in love with him, once. She'd thought it was special, something just between them, but as she goes inside, she can see that here he is, singing it to *Sam*, who he must've only *just* met, and who is sitting on the couch wearing an infuriatingly superior smirk as he serenades her.

"*Robbie Shapiro!*" Cat shrieks.

Robbie falls over in shock, and Cat storms over to Sam, *knowing* that Sam has done this on purpose, as revenge for Freddie. Sam feigns innocence as Cat yells at her, still not sure if she's more upset about *Robbie* singing their special song to Sam or that it's Robbie singing their special song to *Sam*. Everything is mixed up. She and Sam are arguing over *boys*, as if that was ever something either of them expressed much interest in. But Sam is clearly upset she invited Freddie down, and Cat knows she's upset about Robbie, it's just hard to know how else to say it when she can't just admit that she's largely upset because she's been jealous of wanting Sam's attention, this whole time, when she's been hanging out with Jade, and now Robbie, and it's just a lot to handle.

But it is true that hearing Robbie sing that song to Sam stung, too.

Robbie, too, seems upset about Freddie, though Freddie is quick to clarify that nothing had happened between himself and Cat. Out of spite, Cat tells him something could have if he'd wanted it to, which makes Robbie want to fight Freddie. But Freddie has no reaction at all to Robbie attempting to punch his stomach, leaving Robbie impressed.

Freddie and Sam begin fighting, and Cat blames Sam for all of this because of what happened with her and Jade. Sam claims that bringing down Freddie was unfair because Cat knows he's the only guy she ever loved. Cat has certainly never heard this, and Freddie seems equally baffled, Sam rolls her eyes and explains she was exaggerating to make her point.

Well, that seems like the most honest part of this whole fight because Cat, at least, knows she *still* hasn't expressed what she's actually upset about. It isn't that Sam stole Jade, though that had hurt, too. It's that Sam seemed to forget about her in the process.

Robbie admits that he doesn't know what's going on here, and Freddie explains to him that they've been used, but just as Robbie starts to get excited about this prospect, Dice comes bursting in.

Cat has no patience for Dice right now, and mocks him to his face. Dice doesn't even seem to care, because he's more worried about his money, as usual. He won an absurd amount of dangerous tuna fish in a poker game and had arranged for a famous stunt motorcyclist to jump the tank of fish, but the driver had backed out.

That's when Sam announces that she will be performing the stunt jump. While looking directly at Cat, as if daring her to try to talk her out of it.

For the first time, Cat is really scared of how far this is all going. "You promised me you wouldn't," Cat argues, tone still fired up from their previous argument, hiding her fear.

"Oh, what do you care?" Sam shoots back, not even wasting any anger on Cat anymore. "You can't like me very much if you're going to flirt with my ex-boyfriend right in front of my face."

"Well, you flirted with Robbie right in front of my face!" Cat offers the only response that makes any sense at the moment.

This just prompts Sam to kiss Robbie, though, which, even though Cat can *clearly* see it's an act of revenge and meaningless, it makes her feel like her heart is going to shatter into a million pieces, especially after Sam tries to rub it in by calling him "some tasty Robbie."

Cat knows she doesn't love Sam any less, but in the moment, it's difficult to remember why. "You know what?" she states, through her heartbreak and rage, "Jump your stupid motorcycle over the tuna fish."

Freddie tries to take control of the situation, stating that this sounds dangerous.

"It is!" Cat assures him vehemently, then returns her attention to Sam. "And I don't care what happens to you," she tells her, storming away after the lie.

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[A postcard with an artistic rendering of a covered bridge with the words *Visit Scenic Vermont: The Green Mountain State*]

Stopped by to visit my sister for a little while. She says hi. We still have absolutely nothing in common except that neither one of us wants to be anywhere near our mom. Melanie is taking extra classes all summer so she can stay at boarding school. Like, who does that? I don't know, maybe you would, to stay with your dad. I guess I'm glad I

visited her though. Neither one of us will ever be “normal” but at least around her I can pretend.

-

Cat can't turn off her feelings. As hurt and angry as she is, she can't just *stop* loving Sam, even though right now, she kind of wishes she could. So, in spite of everything, she still tries to ensure Sam is well-fed before the motorcycle jump and makes pizza. But, because she's still angry, she cuts the pizza into rectangles instead of triangles, because she knows Sam hates that.

Sam has a predictably infuriated response, and Cat uses the moment to express *again* why she's angry at Sam and makes sure Sam knows she has no remorse for cutting her pizza into rectangles.

Their petty argument is interrupted by the arrival of Dice, who has a dirt bike for Sam to use for the jump and who has a contract drafted by his lawyer protecting him from any legal liability if Sam injures herself performing the stunt. Cat listens as Dice details what kinds of injuries he is not responsible for, and watches as Sam signs off on this, completely nonchalant, as if she doesn't care whatsoever that she might lose her *head* doing a stupid motorcycle stunt.

Cat can't take it anymore. “Stop it! Just stop it! You are not jumping over a bunch of dangerous tuna fish!” she yells at Sam, as her fear begins to overtake her anger and hurt.

“Who asked you?” Sam fires back dismissively, a sour look on her face. She tells Dice to go get everything ready.

Cat doesn't like this. As much as Sam has hurt her, and as much as she'd wanted to hurt Sam in return, this *isn't* how she wants things to go. Sam could *die* doing this stunt, and it's clear that she doesn't care even a little, and that somehow hurts Cat more than anything that had happened with Robbie and Jade. “You are not going to jump the tuna,” Cat tries again, attempting to sound authoritative as Dice leaves them alone.

“Oh, why aren't I?” Sam counters, clearly itching for an argument.

“Cause I'm not going to let you do something stupid and get hurt!” Cat fires back in frustration.

“Oh, I'm sorry, weren't you the one who said, ‘I don't care what happens to you’?”

The way Sam throws those words back in her face feels like a sinking in her stomach. Cat tries to offer an explanation for why she'd said something so hurtful, something Sam is clearly holding onto if she'd brought it up this way, but even as she explains about Sam stealing Jade and kissing Robbie, it falls flat. Because that's *not* why Cat is so hurt, but it's the closest explanation she can offer.

Sam doesn't have a ready response to any of that, and instead simply says that she made a promise to Dice and that she never goes back on her word. “Somebody has to jump over

those tuna on a motorcycle,” she finishes.

She starts to walk away. Cat *can't* let her go. All she can think about is all the ways Sam, who is already so reckless, could end up injured, even *dead*, because she's going off to do this stupid thing to prove to Cat that no one cares about her.

But Cat *does*. She cares about Sam so much it feels like it's eating her up inside, like a flood of warmth is slowly drowning the smoldering remains of Cat's anger inside her belly.

“Fine!” Cat shouts, “I'll jump the tuna!”

Sam laughs at her. “You couldn't jump over a can of tuna!”

Sam asks for help finding something she needs in the closet, and Cat sees her opportunity. She shoves Sam inside and shuts the door, jamming a chair under it and then nailing a board across it. Good thing she paid attention to all the times Sam used a nail gun; she can quickly seal off that front closet with Sam inside, no matter how much Sam protests. Cat shrieks that she cares about Sam even after everything and leaves her inside.

Cat takes all of Sam's motorcycle gear, the stylized red, black, and white outfit that seems to be more for show than for protection, and quickly changes her clothes. She can hear Sam still knocking on the closet door when she comes back out front, complaining that she needs to leave for the stunt and that she doesn't have any food in the closet with her. “Cat, what are you doing?” Sam asks in exasperation.

“I'm wearing your silly suit and I'm gonna go jump the tuna fish,” Cat replies stubbornly.

“Dude, you're gonna get hurt!” Sam replies, sounding as though the fight is already leaving her.

“Well, then that's a price I'll have to pay for saving a friend from doing something stupid,” Cat counters.

“But *you're* doing something stupid,” Sam drawls back.

“Wouldn't be the first time,” Cat replies bravely. She knows her reputation. And besides that, doing something stupid in the name of love? That's just the name of the game, after all.

Cat does her best to disguise herself as Sam, even going so far as to stuff a pair of oranges into her suit so that someone might think they were Sam's breasts. She looks ridiculous, she knows, but she's made up her mind, and she can be awfully hard to sway once that happens. Even within herself.

Cat slides the rectangular pizza under the closet door to distract Sam (who can't help but shout in a rage about the pizza's shape) and heads for the wharf on Sam's dirt bike, her mind continually running a mantra. She is doing this *for Sam*. Sam can't do this without getting hurt and, well, Cat will probably get hurt, too. But she would rather it be her than someone she loves so much. And all of this is her fault, anyway. Not Jade's, or really even Sam's. The culprit is her own jealousy. Who cares if Sam and Jade turn out to be best friends? Sam is still

Cat's roommate, they still have their own bond. And maybe Sam is never meant to be anything more to her than that.

And at the very least, if Cat knows in her heart that she could save Sam from certain injury, she could make sure that Sam, at least, could be better off having met Cat. Even if all she ever turns out to be to Sam is a passing acquaintance.

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[A postcard of a painting of mountains, a waterfall flowing into a river, with a moose in the foreground above text that says White Mountain National Forest, New Hampshire]

Carls,

Would've been easy to just pass right through New Hampshire, I've mostly just seen small towns and wilderness. But this cool little local shop that sold really good cheese caught my eye and they had these postcards, so. I've almost reached the other side of the country, which is crazy to think. That much closer to the ocean, that much closer to you, technically. Not that it means much when you're still so far away.

Sam

-

There's no way Cat is serious. Okay, she seems serious enough about making sure Sam isn't going to jump the tuna, but to jump it herself? Ridiculous. Sam doesn't think she'll even get the dirt bike to the wharf in one piece. Cat might bike everywhere, but a bicycle is not the same beast at all.

Sam figures she's just waiting in the house to at least make sure Sam doesn't go anywhere, even when she hears the buzzing sound of the dirt bike engine fading away. Okay, fine, they can play this game. She knows Cat. So Sam sits quietly in the closet and eats the pizza—fuming at the rectangular shape; honestly, who *does* that?—and waits for Cat to crack.

But after the pizza is gone, and Cat *still* hasn't said anything to break the silence in the apartment, Sam starts to second guess herself.

She starts banging on the closet door again, shouting for Cat, for Dice, for anyone who might hear her to let her out. If Cat is still here, this will surely get her attention. She'd responded when Sam had knocked and argued before.

But there's no response, and now that she's no longer so focused on the pizza, Sam can tell that she's alone.

Which means that Cat *actually* left. Which means that Cat might *actually* try to jump the tuna.

Sam feels the fear move through her limbs, cold, like rainwater, but like so many of her biggest emotions, it quickly morphs to anger. Damn it, there is *no way* she's going to let Cat hurt herself trying to stop *her* from getting hurt. That's not how this is going to work.

Sam punches through the closet door. It feels effortless. Maybe it *is* effortless, right now, when she's so overwhelmed that all she can think about is that she *has* to go to the wharf. She *has* to stop Cat. She never knew her roommate could be this brave, and she's not going to let it cost her a limb. Or her head. Or whatever she signed off on with Dice. It was fine for *her*, what did she really have to lose, but not for Cat.

Sam knows that Cat is too special for that, even if she's nowhere close to expressing it in words, even to herself.

She finishes tearing her way through the closet door, and the effort makes her hungry, but not even the temptation of food can delay her from chasing after Cat on her motorcycle.

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[A postcard with an artistic rendering of a lighthouse on the shore, the sky alight with the colors of the sunset, reflected in the sea below, with the text Portland, ME]

Well, what do you know, Carls, we made it across the country, officially. Started out in a city on one ocean (sorta), here I am in a city on the other. I've seen so much though that it doesn't feel as crazy as I thought it would. I dunno. It's been weird to do this all by myself. Sometimes things get a little sketchy, but I know I can take care of myself, and I guess, in a way, it does feel like you're with me, a little bit, when I send these. So, thanks, I guess, for coming along. There's still a lot more to see.

—Sam

-

Cat somehow makes it to the wharf without crashing, though it's a near thing. Good thing it's not that far to go. She has to figure out how her brakes even work as she circles the wharf, trying not to run over a man, but luckily, the crowd seems to love it.

The crowd loves *her*. That's something Cat can relate to. It's part of why she enjoys performing. The applause, the validation, and she is ready to feed off of the crowd's energy.

Even though the cold lump in the pit of her stomach makes it clear to her that she is in way, *way*, over her head.

Dice comes over to check that she's ready and Cat tries to imitate Sam, but does such a poor job that she even embarrasses herself. Dice, with dollar signs in his eyes, doesn't even question it, but this feels like another bad omen. Cat is not in the right headspace for *any* of this, and she knows it.

But what other choice does she have?

"Okay," Cat tells herself, "I can do this. I'm a person. Trust the Force!"

But there is no confidence in her tone, no confidence in her at all.

The crowd counts down. The show must go on. And Cat is nothing if not a consummate performer.

And just as the countdown finishes, she hears a voice behind her shout, “Cat, no!”

It’s too late. Cat speeds toward the jump. Though just as quickly as she takes off, she loses control of the dirt bike, rolling off of it while it skitters away toward the giant tanks of tuna fish.

In seconds, Sam is by her side, helping her to her feet, asking if she’s okay.

“I think so.” Cat assesses her body, and once she’s on her feet, she feels surprisingly okay. Just knocked around a little bit, maybe scraped up and bruised.

And Sam is right there, strong arms keeping her steady as she finds her balance. “Dude, why did you do that, you don’t know how to ride a motorcycle!” Sam sounds frustrated. Scared.

“To protect you,” Cat replies simply.

She watches as Sam’s face softens, and that’s worth everything.

A lot happens after that, but Cat is still so dazed and shocked from what happened that Sam’s face is what she remembers best. But the evening ends with a trip to the hospital. Cat is examined, and it’s determined she’s fine, other than some scrapes and bruises—she has no concussion, however, and once she’s no longer running on adrenaline, she’s feeling better, though she’s also more aware of the parts of her body that are sore from her fall. Sam, who jumped into the tank of tuna fish to help Freddie, almost refuses to let the doctors look at her, but Cat insists, and it turns out she’s pretty lucky, the tuna barely paid attention to her, and her few abrasions are bandaged up.

Robbie and Freddie, however, are not so lucky. Cat hadn’t seen it happen, because she’d been on the ground at that point, but when the dirt bike got away from her, it hit the lift they’d been standing on, and they took a long fall into the tank of tuna fish. The two boys are in hospital beds, heavily bandaged.

Cat feels bad for them, especially Robbie. Evidently, Sam feels something of the same thing, because she asks Freddie to grab dinner when he’s feeling better. But then, she also takes eighty dollars from his wallet, so, one way or another, he’s probably paying. When Robbie asks Cat to do something similar when he’s feeling better, she agrees. She and Robbie are friends. That isn’t about to change after all this.

And after that, she and Sam go home. To *their* home, the one Sam helped make for them.

The first thing Cat notices is the door to the front closet, which is in splinters. “Wow.” She stares at it.

Next to her, Sam shrugs. “Well, I had to do *something* so I could try to stop you from getting hurt.”

Cat winces. “I—” she starts, but then, she realizes, she’s not sorry at all. So she says it. “I’m not sorry.”

“What?” Sam asks, sounding surprised and a little confused.

“I’m glad I did it. Even if it does mean we have to replace this door.”

Sam waves a hand. “I’ll handle it. All the landlord will do is price gouge if we report it to him.”

Cat nods, and it seems like the moment passes, but Sam is still staring at her, as if still taking in what she had said, and Cat realizes she has more to say. “Sam,” she starts, “I was so scared I was going to lose you.”

“Well, how do you think I felt?” Sam shoots back, and her tone is more argumentative than Cat’s. “At least I know how to ride a motorcycle. Knowing you were going to try to do something that would even be hard for *me*...” her voice softens, “was terrifying.”

Cat is quiet for a moment. There’s no easy way to explain to Sam why she felt so strongly that she needed to protect her from herself. “I wish we’d never fought.” Cat’s shoulders droop. “Especially over something so stupid.”

Sam folds her arms. “I still don’t get why you had such a problem with Jade and I getting along. She’s really cool.”

Cat’s defensiveness flares up. “Because she’s my oldest friend. And you both forgot all about me!”

“We went to see horror movies together. You wouldn’t have wanted to come with us anyway.” Sam scowls.

“It was more than that. It was before that. When you were both mean to me for no reason.” Sam shifts uncomfortably at that. “But I never should have called Freddie,” Cat admits.

“Yeah,” Sam scratches awkwardly at the back of her neck. “I shouldn’t have called Robbie, either. I guess I didn’t really know how much he meant to you. You never really talked about him.”

Cat shakes her head. “Robbie *was* special to me. A while ago. If he still were, I’d probably be dating him. But I’m not.”

“You said he was your ‘kind of boyfriend.’” Sam air quotes the words, eyes narrowed skeptically.

“I was upset. I exaggerated. The way you exaggerated about how much you *love* Freddie.” Cat can’t help that she says the word *love* so sarcastically. She also can’t help that there’s a bit of a question in her tone.

Sam is quiet, face twisted, and she finally speaks hesitantly. “Seeing Freddie was hard. Not because of our history, that was barely anything. But because...I tried to put Seattle and

everything that happened there behind me. That's why I hadn't even really talked to him in a long time. I wasn't ready to see him."

Cat nods, as if she understands, because she kind of does, though she's also burning with questions. But she holds back. Instead, she flings herself at Sam. "I'm just glad you're safe," she murmurs.

Sam's voice cracks slightly. "Yeah. Me, too, kid." And for once, she doesn't insist that she's not a hugger, and lets Cat hold her.

Cat realizes she's crying a little as she presses her face into Sam's neck and shoulder, and she realizes, she *doesn't* want to keep anything to herself anymore. She never wants Sam to want to run away from Los Angeles and leave her behind, taking along just painful memories, and she hates that calling Freddie had made Sam confront some things she wasn't ready for. "And I'm sorry about all of it. About our fight. Because it wasn't even really about Jade or Robbie for me."

Sam shifts slightly in her embrace, seemingly trying to catch Cat's eye, but Cat keeps her head down, buried in Sam's wild hair. "Yeah? Then what was it about?" Sam asks, her voice quiet.

Cat pulls back to look Sam in the eye. "It was about you." She shrugs. "Jade and Robbie, yeah, that hurt a little bit. But what hurt the most was feeling like you didn't want to be around me. That you didn't like me anymore."

"Cat." Sam's face has softened again, into that expression Cat will never forget, because she thinks she may have been one of the only people in the world who has seen it.

"You mean *so much* to me, Sam," Cat tells her directly.

And in a moment, they're kissing. And Cat knows she wasn't the only one to push them here, knows that Sam moved, too, that Sam is kissing her back. Cat half-whimpers, half-sobs into the kiss, her entire self *aching* with the sweetness of it, the release of finally being able to do what she had wanted for so long. Of finally giving Sam some inkling of how she feels about her, had felt about her after only knowing her a few days.

It feels like it lasts for a long time, and she can feel Sam's hands on her back and shoulders, holding her, fingers bunching into the fabric of the stupid stunt jump outfit Cat is still wearing. She can feel the hunger as Sam kisses her (and Sam's hunger is something she's very familiar with), can *hear* it in the hum in her throat.

As long as the kiss seems, it's still too soon when Sam pulls away. And, to Cat's shock, she fully pulls away, even going so far as to take a couple of steps back. "I can't," Sam utters hollowly.

"You just did," Cat points out, utterly baffled.

Sam shakes her head. "No, I—I can't. I can't explain it to you, but...I'm sorry. I really am." She starts toward the patio door.

“Where are you going?” Cat asks, heart squeezing in her chest, but after everything that has happened today, she’s just so *tired*, and that’s the only thing in her own voice she can recognize.

“Out for a while,” Sam says, without even pausing as she continues toward the door.

“All night again?” Cat asks, but Sam either doesn’t hear her or ignores her, and moments later, Cat hears her motorcycle growl to life, and Sam is gone.

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[A postcard with an overhead view of Fenway Park and the Charles River, above which the word “Boston” has both its O’s replaced with baseballs, from Boston, MA]

The accent here is no joke. Not everybody has it but when you find someone who does, it’s hard not to laugh. I kinda like it here, though. Everyone I have to talk to seems to hate me as much as I hate them, and I respect that. And the Common—it’s nice to feel grass under my feet after so much asphalt and concrete. I don’t know if I’m ever gonna settle down anywhere ever again, but a part of me likes to imagine you and me and a little apartment in a city just like this.

-

Cat is...not heartbroken.

It surprises her, a little. Having Sam run away after a kiss is just about the worst case scenario that she’d been able to imagine in all the months she’s been very studiously imagining kissing Sam. But that *kiss*. It’s unforgettable, and Cat *knows* a kiss like that isn’t the kind of kiss you give if you *really* don’t want something.

So whatever Sam’s “can’t” is...it’s not because she doesn’t *want*.

Cat tries not to think about Sam’s “can’t”, or about Sam out alone on her motorcycle, as she prepares for bed after a *really* long day, an end to an even longer weekend, with everything that happened. She mostly succeeds, though she *does* idly wonder *why* Sam would say she *can’t*. Is it because they live together? That just seems convenient to Cat, though she guesses it could be really awkward if they broke up. Not that they’re...even dating. But they might, right? If Sam can work past whatever this “can’t” is or at least *talk* to Cat so Cat can know if it’s something she needs to work on or...she’s getting way ahead of herself.

She wonders if it has to do with why Sam has to get away from her every once in a while.

But mostly, as Cat snuggles down under her covers, she remembers that kiss. She remembers the way Sam’s voice sounded as she held Cat, she remembers the way her face softened, at the wharf, and when it had happened again, just before they started kissing. And *god*, that kiss had been *amazing*, so intimate and sweet and validating and precious...

Cat feels warm and shivery all over at the certainty that Sam *feels something* for her. It’s obvious. And that confidence is enough to protect her heart, for now.

But just as Cat begins to fall asleep, she hears the door to the bedroom open.

“Sam?” she asks.

Sam pauses just inside the bedroom door, gazing at Cat, and nods. “Yeah, it’s me,” she says quietly.

Cat begins to sit up a little as Sam heads to her own side of the bedroom. “I thought you’d be gone all night,” she comments.

Sam shakes her head. “Nope. Just had to clear my head a little.”

“Oh.” Cat considers that, considers the nights Sam disappears. What *does* she do all night that she wouldn’t want to do on a night when it is obviously kind of awkward to be home? Sam still isn’t really saying anything, just kicking off her shoes and pulling off her leather jacket. “Is your head clear?” Cat asks finally.

Sam shrugs. “Not really,” she finally admits, and she glances over at Cat, eyes lingering on her briefly, before she turns back around, facing away from her. There is a palpable hesitation, one that has certainly never existed before in all the times Sam has casually dressed and undressed in front of Cat (Cat’s own sense of decorum has her keeping her own state of undress private), before Sam pulls her t-shirt over her head and quickly takes off her bra before she pulls on a different t-shirt to sleep in.

Cat blushes and looks away, though after it all happens. She wonders if maybe she is making Sam uncomfortable, so she lies back down, eyes on the ceiling, though she’s aware that Sam is changing into her pajama pants. She hears Sam flop onto her own bed, and the silence in the room feels oppressive, the weight of everything unspoken bearing down on Cat, and she continues to stare at the ceiling, unable to stop thinking about Sam across the room, about how they’d *kissed* tonight.

It’s been long enough that Cat’s eyes start to close, and she assumes Sam has probably fallen asleep, when finally, Sam breaks the silence. “Cat?”

Cat shifts, lifting her head to try to look at Sam across the room. Sam’s head is lifted, too, and she’s looking at Cat. “Yeah?” Cat asks.

“I’m really sorry,” Sam says quietly.

Cat thinks she knows exactly what Sam means, but she wants to hear her say it. “For what?” she asks.

There’s no answer. Cat thinks that Sam is just going to ignore the question, but then Sam finally says, “For kissing you.”

Cat takes a deep breath and lowers her head back onto her pillow, trying to keep her heart protected. “Sure didn’t feel like you were sorry to *me*,” she counters, almost petulantly, eyes back on the ceiling.

“I wasn’t. That’s not what I mean,” Sam says very quietly. “I’m just sorry I did it when I know I can’t do anything else.”

Cat looks back over at Sam again, but Sam is not looking at her anymore. “What do you mean?” Cat asks.

There’s no answer, and in a few minutes, she hears Sam’s breathing even out, like she’s asleep.

But Cat knows she’s just pretending, because she isn’t snoring.

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[A postcard featuring a lighthouse on the edge of a cliff with a sailboat in the distance on the ocean. Below the image is the state flag and text “Rhode Island: The Ocean State”]

Very nearly forgot about this one. Just kinda dipped in long enough to grab a postcard and got out. You know planning isn’t my strong suit but I am trying to plan a little here, so I can make sure I hit every state. And, well, here’s this one. This tiny one. I guess I don’t really have much to say about it except I was here.

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The next week is understandably awkward.

All Cat can really do is trust (hope) that Sam might find some way to come around. But in the meantime, there’s school, and babysitting, which has been quite steady this month. A lot of straightforward babysitting gigs means they’re definitely out of last month’s spending slump, and Cat can’t help but be a little frustrated that they’ve ended up with this kind of money *after* Christmas.

She still wishes she’d gotten Sam something for Christmas, but the next gift giving holiday is Valentine’s Day and...yeah, probably not a good idea to buy Sam something for *that* right now, not while they’re still coexisting in an apartment that abruptly feels too small and trying to pretend like they never kissed, never both enjoyed it immensely.

The only plus to the week is that it feels like it’s over quickly.

But on Friday, after Cat comes home from school, it isn’t long before Sam tells her she’s “Going out.”

Something in Cat just snaps. Something in Cat *knows* that this time, she can’t let Sam leave for the entire night again.

Cat knows she has to stop her.

“Are you sure?” She bats her eyelashes, just a couple of times, nothing over the top. “I was planning to make your favorite meatballs for dinner.”

Sam has her jacket halfway on and stops cold, eyes shifting to look at Cat. “You’re making meatballs?”

“Yup!” Cat chirps. “Just feels like a meatballs kinda night, you know?”

Sam stares at her for another few long seconds, but then seems to shake herself off and finishes slipping her jacket over her arms. “Save me some leftovers,” she says tonelessly.

Cat can’t help but frown, though she is undeterred. “But Saaaam,” she draws her name out coyly, “I just thought we could spend the night together.”

She has Sam’s attention again, and Sam is just looking at her, eyes wide. “What?”

“You know,” Cat tries. “We could have some *fun*.” She lets the implications sink in before she clarifies, “I could make some popcorn, we could watch a movie, we could just hang out all night. Like we used to.”

Sam takes a deep breath, eyes still on Cat, before she tears her gaze away. “Sorry. I can’t. I have to go.”

“Wait!” Cat hollers, “Why don’t you take some meatballs for the road?” She hurries to the fridge.

“You *made* them already? When?” Sam asks incredulously, but she isn’t moving for the patio door.

“Well, no, I haven’t,” Cat admits, “But I swear it won’t take long!”

“Cat, I’ve really got to go.”

Cat finds what she needs in the fridge. “No, see, wait, I’ll show you!” She hurries back over toward Sam and then mimes tripping, allowing her hand that is holding an open jar of pasta sauce to fling outward, splattering sauce on Sam’s shirt.

What she *doesn’t* count on is how quickly Sam moves to catch her as she faux-stumbles, which means not only does pasta sauce end up *everywhere* on the two of them, but also, Cat catches herself with her other hand on Sam’s breast.

For a moment, they’re both completely frozen. Cat’s eyes are fixated on where her hand has landed, and it takes her a good, long moment to look up at Sam’s face.

Sam is breathing heavily, eyes a stormy blue, and Cat isn’t sure if Sam is about to kill her or kiss her.

Sam moves abruptly, breaking away from Cat, spreading her arms and staring down at her outfit. She groans in frustration, then gives Cat a stern look. “Okay. I have to go change my clothes, but *then*, I’m leaving. I’m serious. I have to go.”

“Okay,” Cat says meekly. She can feel herself blushing as she looks at the distinct spaghetti sauce handprint on Sam’s breast.

As soon as Sam disappears into the bedroom, though, Cat grabs a dishtowel to dab up the worst of the sauce on her outfit, then rushes out onto the patio. She kneels next to Sam's motorcycle. For something with a similar two-wheel design, nothing much about Sam's motorcycle resembles her bicycle. Except...there it is. The valve on the tire looks exactly the same as the one on Cat's bicycle, and she unscrews the cap and presses down on the valve with her fingernail, just the same way she does on her bike tires, and feels and hears the air start to hiss out of Sam's motorcycle tires.

By the time Sam comes out onto the patio, dressed in a tomato sauce-free outfit and clearly in a rush, both her tires are completely flat.

Sam goes very, very still. "Cat," she growls. "What did you do?"

Cat plants her feet very firmly on the ground. If there's one thing she's learned about herself recently, it's that she's braver than she knew, and when it comes to Sam, she's willing to fight for her. "I let the air out of your tires," she replies, tone defiant.

"*Why* would you *do* that?" Sam is yelling now, striding toward her, eyes as wild as her hair.

And Cat meets her with equal ferocity. "Because I'm not letting you go anywhere tonight! I'm tired of this! I'm tired of the secrets and the lies! And I'm not going to do it anymore and that means you need to stop, too!"

"I can do whatever I want to!" Sam shoots back. "You don't get to choose for me." She jabs her finger at Cat.

"I already did," Cat sneers back, gesturing to the flat tires on the vehicle next to her. "You're staying home with me tonight."

Sam huffs out a few exasperated breaths, then turns and storms back into the house, Cat at her heels. Once they're inside, Sam spins around and spreads her hands. "Fine! You want to know why I have to leave? You want to know what's going to happen if I stay?"

"Yes!" Cat shouts. "That's *all I want*! For you to be honest with me!"

"Well, okay then," Sam yells back. "I'm a werewolf!"

Wolf

[A postcard showing photographs depicting erudite buildings, green lawns and a lot of deciduous trees, with the words “Yale University and New Haven, Connecticut” arching across the photos]

Can you imagine? Me at Yale. I guess it seemed more ridiculous until I was actually here and no one really even batted an eye. Melanie probably wants to go here. But for me it mostly just felt wrong, like, it started to not even feel worth the joke to send this postcard from Yale. I guess it's pretty? I'll give it that.

-

The silence in the apartment after Sam's pronouncement is so complete that it *feels* loud, like the ambient sounds echo and redouble in Cat's ears as she stares at Sam, letting herself process exactly *what* Sam had just shouted in the living room. Finally, Cat's voice comes out, dull and bewildered, saying the only thing that makes any sense right now. “What?”

As much as she's been staring at Sam, it's like she wasn't quite processing what she was seeing, until now, as Sam speaks and she realizes Sam's frustration seems to have evaporated with her confession, and she's almost quiet as she repeats, “I'm a werewolf.” Her arms are folded, and she's staring back at Cat, her expression stoic but her eyes guarded.

“But,” Cat starts, then shakes her head. “Sam, *what*?”

“You need me to say it again?”

Cat is still shaking her head. “No, I—I'm sorry. I don't understand what is happening?” For some reason, Cat feels scared, and her voice trembles a little as she says, “I...werewolves aren't real. That's what I always heard. But *you're* real and...I don't know what to think.”

“You're not supposed to know we're real.” Sam's voice is measured, but it comes out a little stronger as she continues, “But we are, and I am one. And I'm still me. I'm still Sam.” Her words are reassuring, but her face is still mostly closed off, though her brows are knit a little in concern.

But Cat just feels completely disoriented. “Sorry, I just—” She walks away to the kitchen. It's like her whole world has tilted on its axis, as she tries to make sense of this being real. Cat has always had a vivid imagination, and this *feels* like her imagination come to life, which makes her afraid that her mind is playing tricks on her, and she knows how frightening it can be if you can't trust your own mind. But everything else *does* feel the same, the apartment is the same. Even Sam is the same, just like she says. Except that she just said something completely insane. But she sounds totally rational.

Cat takes a deep breath and turns back around to look at her. Sam had lowered her arms and stepped a little closer to the kitchen in the time that Cat was trying to process what she'd been told. “Are you...okay?” Sam asks.

“I think so,” Cat replies softly. “So, wait. Okay. So you’re...” she trails off. It still feels like she shouldn’t *say* it, like if she says it, it will either be the punchline of a very bad joke, or proof that Cat has lost her mind.

“...A werewolf...” Sam says slowly, “Yeah.”

“I *want* to believe you,” Cat tells her. “I mean, I *do* believe you, it’s just...hard to believe, at the same time.”

Sam shrugs, “Well. Just wait until the sun goes down.”

Cat feels her eyes widen. “Is *that* why you leave?” Weirdly, putting this piece together makes her feel a little better. Not only because there’s finally an explanation for Sam’s longtime odd behavior but...the fact that it’s a long-standing thing that aligns with what Sam just told her makes it feel more real, somehow.

“Yeah,” Sam confirms. “I left so that you wouldn’t see me. And then, you know, I’m a wolf all night, so I could only come home once I was human again.”

“But wait,” Cat frowns, “you don’t *always* change. You were there for the Throbbing Moon.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t have to change every time. There’s this like stuff I can take if I want to prevent it. So I took that on the night of the Throbbing Moon.” She glances out the window behind Cat. “Which, uh, should I go take some now? Because like, if you have a lot more questions, I won’t be able to answer them soon.”

Cat blinks at the realization that Sam is offering her a choice, about whether or not Sam is going to apparently change into a wolf tonight. “Well, wait. What happens when you change?”

“I become a wolf?” Sam’s answer is half a question, as she’s clearly confused about what Cat is asking her

“No, I get that part, but like...are you going to eat me?”

Sam’s eyes run down her body in a quick scan that makes Cat’s cheeks feel briefly hot, but Sam smiles for the first time since the conversation begins, a reassuring smile. “Nah. I’m a wolf, but I’m not a monster.” Her expression sobers slightly. “Look, I get where you’re coming from. I know this sounds crazy. But I can show you, if that would help. Or I can spend the evening answering more of your questions. But I can’t do both.”

Cat considers the offer. “I know I’m going to have a lot of questions, but, I think I really need to see it, first.”

“Seeing is believing, or whatever,” Sam nods. “I mean, I still have a little time, if you have more questions.”

Cat has *so many* questions, and it’s difficult to know where to start. But they had just been discussing the times Sam would leave the apartment all night, so she starts there. “Where do you go, when you leave the apartment all night?”

“Had to figure that out,” Sam replies. “That’s why I left so much earlier the first couple times, I had to figure out where might be safe and discreet. It’s not like Seattle where I was like really close to a whole bunch of forest. LA is a desert. But you have like hiking trails and things in the hills where people aren’t supposed to go after dark, so that’s relatively safe.”

“Oh. Huh.” Cat isn’t much for hiking, but she knows the kinds of places Sam is talking about. She guesses it makes sense. Truthfully, though, her mind is swimming too much to think of a lot of other questions to ask, or, well, really, to figure out which ones to ask first. She thinks she honestly needs to really...see and experience Sam as a werewolf before she can wrap her head around all of it. So her next question is something of a way to close down the line of inquiry. “Do werewolves like meatballs?”

Sam’s face splits into a wide grin. “Hell yeah, we do. Or, well, I do anyway. Can’t really speak for all of us.”

“Okay,” Cat giggles, “then I’m going to change my shirt,” she gestures to the sauce stain on her blouse, “and then work on making some dinner, and then you can go, you know...get ready to change, or whatever.”

Sam watches her thoughtfully for a few moments, then shrugs. “Okay. I’ll be in the bedroom after you’re done.” She glances past Cat out the window again. “It’ll probably be, I don’t know, twenty minutes or so?”

“I’ll be here,” Cat assures her. “Just come out whenever you’re ready.” And with that, they part, and Cat hurries back to the bedroom to change her shirt and allows herself to already begin focusing on making dinner, because *that’s* something she can always make sense of.

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[A postcard featuring locations, plants, foods, and animals associated with the state of New Jersey, such as the Cape May Point Lighthouse, the blue violet, Jersey bagels, and the brook trout, surrounding the word “New Jersey”]

I had to pass through NYC again, since I was so close. Really, there’s no place like it. But being there alone isn’t the same as being there with you, getting to be on Jimmy Fallon and watching Gibby buy faulty pants from a street vendor. But anyway. New Jersey. The highways have some pretty flowers planted in the median but they’re a pain to navigate. And people have to pump your gas for you? I did not want that sweaty dude to touch my bike. What a weird state.

-

Sam heads back into the bedroom, switching places with Cat after she hurriedly puts on a clean shirt in there. She feels apprehensive as she prepares to change and...well, show Cat what she really is. It’s hard to know what to expect. She’s only ever shared this with one other person before, and the circumstances were very different.

Sam paces in the bedroom, waiting for the sun to fully set. As the sky outside gradually darkens, Sam takes off her clothes and sits on her bed and waits.

Sometimes, when she changes, she still thinks about the first time it happened. But it's on her mind even more tonight.

"I don't know, I just feel weird," Sam said, shaking her hands as if she'd just washed them and didn't have a towel to dry them. "Can we just, like, stay at home tonight?"

Carly smiled indulgently, but her eyes were concerned, "Sure, whatever you need. Want me to ask Spencer to make spaghetti tacos?"

Sam loved Spencer's spaghetti tacos, but she couldn't even muster up much enthusiasm for them, which was how she knew something was off. "Yeah, okay."

Carly stared at her, then pressed her hand to Sam's forehead. "Okay, you're sick. You have to be sick. I've never heard you so uninterested in food before."

Sam swatted Carly's hand away, but playfully. "I'm not sick. I mean, I don't think I am. I just know something's not right." Her stomach felt...off, but not like she was going to throw up or anything. It felt like it was twisting like it did when she was nervous, except that she wasn't nervous, there was no reason for it to be reacting this way.

It wasn't just her stomach, either. It was the way her hands felt like they had too much energy in them, and she kept trying to shake them out, and the way she just couldn't stop pacing in Carly's room. It was the way her mind was just racing. Sam had felt like this before, but there was usually a reason attached to it. Right now, there was no reason.

"I don't know, I just feel like I'm nervous but what do I have to be nervous about?"

The question was rhetorical, but Carly was still watching her sympathetically and apparently decided to take a stab at it. "Maybe you're worried because you haven't heard from your mom in a few days?"

Sam snorted, "I'm not worried about that, I'm relieved." Her mom had decided to take a trip across the country to visit Melanie at boarding school for the first time. One of Sam's uncles had gotten a gig as a long-haul trucker and Pam was riding along with him across the country to get to Vermont to see Sam's sister. Sam certainly didn't envy Melanie, who she knew wasn't exactly torn up about the fact that she was too far away for their mother to routinely visit.

It was kind of the reason Sam was even at Carly's, though. It wasn't uncommon for her to be left home alone a lot, but with her mom already having been gone for almost a week, this was a longer stretch than she was usually left to her own devices. And Sam had already eaten all the food in her house. When Carly realized that, she invited Sam to stay over until her mom came back home, and though Spencer didn't know all the details, he never seemed to mind much if Carly had Sam over.

But Sam had stayed over at Carly's countless times, and it had never felt like this. But then, Sam had been kinda feeling like this all day, it just felt worse now that they'd been home from

school for a couple of hours. “Seriously, Carly, I don’t know, something’s wrong...”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you,” Carly said seriously, going over to Sam and placing her hands on her shoulders to stop her from pacing. “Talk to me, Sam. What is it?”

“I don’t know,” Sam said harshly. “I just feel wrong. And why is it so bright outside?”

Carly glanced uncertainly over her shoulder. “It’s really not,” she stated worriedly, “The sun is almost set.”

What happened next was the hardest part for Sam to remember clearly. She remembered doubling over, Carly crying out her name and trying to help her, and Sam’s eyes were squeezed shut as she felt her body move, but like, she wasn’t moving it. It was like her innards and her bones were moving independently.

She remembered being on the floor of Carly’s room, feeling her clothes start to tangle around her body, she remembered knowing acutely that Carly was on the floor in front of her, frozen in shock, watching as Sam turned into a wolf right in front of her.

It was weird, that even though Sam obviously couldn’t see herself, there was a part of her that was aware that she was a wolf. Maybe it was just that it was the most obvious conclusion when you suddenly started shapeshifting under a full moon, but it was as if something in Sam’s mind felt like it settled into place at the same time, something essential to her nature that had always been there, and it was as though she could finally see it. But ‘see’ wasn’t the right word. It was a different sort of sense. In fact, a lot of Sam’s senses felt different; even the way her brain worked felt different, less verbal, more just attuned somehow. Aware. Impressions and intuitions were at the forefront of her mind now, but it wasn’t as though she’d lost her human ability to think with language completely. And right now, the sensation she was most aware of was discomfort.

Because Sam’s clothes didn’t exactly rip off her body the way they did in the movies. In fact, Sam was so tangled up that when she tried to stand on her four new paws, fully a wolf, she ended up stumbling and whining, which seemed to snap Carly out of her frozen state. “Oh my god, Sam!” And, inexplicably, Carly started laughing.

Sam growled at her, frustrated that she couldn’t speak, because what she wanted to say was “A little help here?” But luckily, between giggles, Carly seemed to understand, and crawled toward her to help Sam out of her clothes. It was uncomfortable, not least because her tail was awkwardly bunched in pants and her wolf legs did not want to bend the way Carly wanted them to to get Sam’s jeans off, but also, it wasn’t as though Sam was exactly thrilled that her best friend was undressing her. She hated feeling helpless, and she hoped that Carly hadn’t noticed that she was not, in fact, wearing a training bra like she claimed; Carly had wanted both of them to get training bras at the same time, to bond, Sam supposed, but Sam really didn’t want to wear a bra until she actually had to. She was perfectly happy being her tomboyish self, and she wasn’t exactly thrilled to grow into “a woman”, but she was almost twelve and it seemed that puberty did not care much what she wanted.

But Carly didn’t have anything to say about Sam’s lack of a training bra. Instead, now that Sam was out of her clothes, Carly was just staring at her. “Holy chiz, did that just happen?”

Carly breathed.

Sam tried to say “Guess so” but all that really came out was a sort of growling bark. Okay, this was frustrating, and she growled again to express that. She tried to twist her head, to look down her body, over her shoulder, and she turned in a full circle trying and failing to see herself in detail;

Carly was still staring, though she was grinning a little as she watched Sam. “Okay, hold on. You can’t see yourself. You have to see yourself.”

Carly began walking over to her closet, and opened the closet door to reveal the full length mirror on the inside. She pushed the door open fully and stepped aside, letting Sam stand in front of it.

And...yep. There was a wolf in Carly’s bedroom. Except...Sam had to admit she was kind of a weird looking wolf. Maybe that’s why Carly wasn’t scared of her. Her legs looked too long—which was not a problem Sam thought she’d ever have in life—and her head looked a little too big. So did her ears, for that matter, while her muzzle looked short. And her paws looked...odd. Like she had too many toes, and they were too long.

But despite her oddities, there was something about her appearance that Sam liked. Her fur looked soft and lush, and she was a shade of gold that Sam didn’t think she’d seen on any pictures of actual wolves before. Sam bared her teeth. They looked strong. She looked strong. She felt strong, and in a way, it felt a little like her outside matched her inside, in that moment.

Carly approached her tentatively, and Sam turned to her. Carly flinched, as if abruptly afraid that Sam might hurt her, but Sam butted her head against Carly’s hand. She wanted some way to show her gratitude, for the fact that Carly was here, with her, on this night that was so extremely fucked up yet also felt to Sam like a huge night of discovery.

And to her surprise, Carly was suddenly on her knees next to her, hugging Sam around the neck, fingers buried in Sam’s thick fur. “We’ll figure this out, Sam,” Carly whispered, “Don’t worry.”

Oh, fuck. Abruptly, Sam realized...this was going to change her life in a huge way. In a way she didn’t think she was ready for.

Her body felt cold, all of a sudden, as she began to consider the implications of...being a werewolf. That had to be what was going on, right? What was she supposed to do, just hide from the rest of the world once a month? How was she even supposed to hide from Spencer tonight? He would surely notice if she didn’t show up to dinner.

Sam closed her eyes and huffed out a breath through her muzzle, letting Carly hold her, and choosing to believe that with Carly by her side, they’d find a way to make this alright.

Sam tries to shake the memories away, but they're particularly acute tonight, with good reason. Carly had accepted Sam almost immediately, but with Cat...after the way she'd reacted to being told what Sam is, Sam isn't quite sure what to expect. That makes her decide something. She hops off of her bed and hurries over to open the safe in her closet. If Cat seems freaked out, she decides, she'll run into the safe room. Cat can lock her in there if she's scared, and Sam will be safe in there until morning.

But really, Sam hopes it doesn't come to that. And as she walks back to her bed to wait, she feels that familiar twisting, low in her gut, that tells her it's going to happen very soon.

She considers calling out to Cat, to warn her, but then, she's not sure if Cat will come back and end up watching it happen. It's probably enough of a shock that she's *told* Cat that she's a werewolf, she isn't sure Cat is ready to *watch* it happen. Sam hadn't known, back when she'd first changed in front of Carly, just how gruesome it could be to watch. That's something she learned later. But then, she'd been wearing clothes for that first transformation, and it wasn't as though she had a choice in how to roll that out to Carly. She has one now.

So she waits, just a few more minutes, then hops down off of her bed to stand nude and wait on the floor until her body begins to morph. She feels the motion beneath her skin, feels the way her bones slide into their new shape, feels the way her back bends and her body lowers, taking her from a two-legged creature to four, feels the way all her senses sharpen, feels the tickle on her skin as her fur grows all over.

And after a minute or so, Sam shakes out her whole body, feeling the way the motion starts in her head and seems to ripple down her whole spine until her bushy tail seems to flick the energy away. She stretches, flexing both her front and back legs, then feels her ears perk in excitement. The apartment smells *amazing*. She takes in some deep sniffs, taking in the odors of so much food, but particularly *meat*, faint whiffs of Dice, Goomer and Nona, the jumbled odors of different kids they've babysat recently, and even Freddie, Robbie and Jade, but mostly...*Cat*.

And Cat smells *good*.

It's not just the cosmetics and hygiene products she uses, though that's a lot of the actual fragrance that Sam associates with her. But there's something beneath the actual sensory experience of the smell that's more of an *impression* somehow. An awareness of what kind of a person Cat is, an awareness of the emotions she evokes. Sam can often sense this kind of thing even in her human form, but it's much more acute when she's a wolf, and as she noses around in Cat's bedding and her clothes, she tries to put names to the feelings that rise up in her.

Affection, but stronger. Much stronger. Cat makes her happy. Cat makes her feel secure. And in return, Cat makes Sam feel *protective*.

That's the sense that wells up in Sam, but also, excitement, because she knows rationally that Cat is in the kitchen preparing meat, and abruptly, Sam barrels through the parted bedroom door and comes charging into the front of the apartment. But halfway there, she realizes she doesn't want to scare Cat, doesn't want Cat to think she's about to be attacked, so tries to slow down.

Sam doesn't count on how smooth the hardwood floors are. Cat keeps them so clean they shine. Sam manages to stay on her feet and they're not slick enough to actually send her into a full slide, but the whole thing does make her stumble, and she basically ends up tap-dancing on all four legs into the living room, stopping just behind the barstools.

Cat is standing at the counter on the other side of the breakfast bar and stares at Sam, mouth dropping open. "Sam?" she asks, though Sam knows it isn't *really* a question.

But, still. Who else would it be? Sam cocks her head to the side, as if to say exactly that, and it makes Cat grin.

"It *is* you," she laughs. "I can see it in your eyes."

Sam tries to glance down her body, as if to suggest that the rest of her should be a dead giveaway, but her eyes don't really work the same as they do when she's a human. Still, the gesture alone must carry enough of the meaning, because Cat giggles at her.

And then Cat is walking slowly around the kitchen island. She must've finished shaping the meatballs, because Sam realizes she can smell them cooking in the oven, not just raw, but there's still the lingering scent of them on Cat's hands, beneath the clean, artificial scent of their floral hand soap. Instinctively, Sam moves to nose at Cat's palm as soon as she's close enough, making Cat jump slightly at the sudden motion, but then she has both palms in front of her, letting Sam sniff, as if Sam is a strange dog she's meeting on the street. Once that impression hits her, Sam backs away, sitting back on her haunches and gazing up at Cat, wanting to let Cat set the pace from now on.

And Cat begins to circle her slowly, keeping a slight distance, really taking Sam in. Sam watches her as Cat murmurs, "Wow," seemingly to herself.

Sam hopes that's a good thing.

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[A postcard depicting digital art featuring a beach scene with grasses and seagulls giving way to clean yellow sand and blue ocean dotted with white sailboats. At the bottom of the postcard are the words "Delaware: The First State."]

Gotta admit I just breezed through this one so I don't have much to say. Might be my last real beachy state for a while, though. The beach is cool, I guess, but it's certainly less interesting when you're alone. Then it's just sand in your boots and the smell of dead things in the surf.

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Cat can't take her eyes off of Sam. She's circled around her, really taking her in, and there's no doubt that it's Sam. When she'd first come out, Cat wondered, briefly, if this could be a very long prank. Sam certainly is the type to go above and beyond with a potential trick like this, as Melanie's visit proved. But it became quickly apparent to Cat that this is definitely *Sam*. She'd said it was her eyes, which are most of it; they're not *exactly* the same color as

Sam's fathomless blue eyes, they're icier, with a prominent ring of amber around the pupil that are definitely not so apparent in Sam's human eyes. But it's more than that. Cat can't really explain it, but it still feels like Sam is standing across the room from her. Because, of course, she *is*. She just looks very, very different from normal.

The major difference is that Sam clearly can't speak to her. And right now, Cat fervently wishes she could, because she wants to know everything. "I know you can't answer me," she starts, "But I'm just gonna talk to you anyway." Sam tosses her head, as if exasperated, and grunts. "I want to know what this is *like*. Like, I can't imagine how it feels to be, well, you."

She swears the look Sam shoots her is the wolf equivalent of *Are you kidding me?*

"I mean, like...I want to know what it's like to change. What it feels like to come back to being human. Do you like it? Or is it annoying?" Cat thinks about it, and begins pacing. "How did this *happen* to you? And how do you keep it a secret?"

Cat continues to ask unanswerable questions as they come to mind, until she realizes she's been lost in her own ruminations and Sam has walked away to just plop on the couch, paw prodding at the television remote to try to turn it on. She goes over to take the remote from her and turn on the TV. "I guess you still like to do the same kind of stuff as a wolf, huh?"

And as if on cue, the kitchen timer goes off. Sam perks up at the sound, and Cat smiles. "Oh, yeah! Meatballs!"

Like an excited puppy, Sam tumbles off the couch, limbs gangly, and follows Cat into the kitchen, watching with huge eyes and perked ears as Cat takes the meatballs out of the oven. Cat had gotten so caught up in questioning Sam that she'd kind of forgotten about preparing the rest of the meal. She has a boiling pot of water waiting for pasta and a pot of sauce simmering (she stirs it quickly; it doesn't seem to have burned).

But, it seems, Sam only has eyes for the meatballs that have just come out of the oven.

"Do you even want pasta?" Cat wonders.

Sam moves her head from side to side, in a very awkward no.

"Okay, well, you have to wait for the meatballs to cool, and then I can let you have some," Cat informs her.

Sam huffs out a harsh sigh, then slinks over to flop back on the couch.

So far, Cat thinks, Sam as a wolf is almost identical to Sam as a human.

Even though she has to eat her meatballs out of the bowl that keeps threatening to slide across the living room floor, while Cat sits at the dining nook with her plate of pasta.

When they're done, the juice from the meatballs seems to have stained Sam's muzzle, and for a fleeting moment, she looks dangerous to Cat, the meat grease looking bloody against the gold of her fur. But then Sam is licking at her face, as if she's trying to get every last flavor of meat into her mouth, and she looks so ridiculous that Cat begins laughing.

In response, Sam narrows her eyes, and lowers the front half of her body toward the floor, emitting a playful little growl.

“What do you want?” Cat wonders, watching her curiously.

She gets her answer as Sam shoots off down the hallway toward the bedroom, and Cat feels laughter rise in her chest as she begins chasing Sam, out of instinct.

When she runs into the bedroom, Sam is waiting for her, in that same playful stance, but next to the window on Sam’s side of the bedroom. Cat widens her stance and bends her knees, arms outstretched as she approaches Sam, trying to cover as much space as she can to make sure she can catch Sam. Sam hunches down further, bushy tail wagging, but suddenly she leaps up onto her bed, then launches herself off of it, past Cat, and is back to running toward the living room.

“Wait!” Cat pants, still laughing, as she runs after Sam. She catches sight of Sam leaping over the couch, bumping into the coffee table as she jumps to the floor on the other side. She spins to watch Cat, preparing to run whichever way Cat circles to get to her.

Cat is laughing too hard to really offer much of a chase, and feigns left before lunging right, which prompts Sam to circle around the couch and past her and back to the bedroom again. Cat follows, and this time, she stops in the doorway, ensuring Sam can’t get past her.

But Sam, being Sam, tries anyway, jumping up onto Cat’s bed as if to divert her, but Cat keeps the doorway covered, and, in a urge she can’t quite explain, reaches for Sam, wrapping her arms around her as she tumbles onto her bed, taking Sam with her. Sam seems quite willing to playfully wrestle with her on the bed, her tail wagging as she lunges at Cat, and Cat laughs as her bed becomes an avalanche of Sam and stuffed animals.

At least until she processes that, if Sam were a human right now, she’d be *on top* of Cat, on her bed, and *that’s* suddenly a lot to process. As much as Sam looks and even *acts* like a dog right now, she’s still a person, and it’s very different to have a *person* in your bed, rather than a dog.

Cat files this away as a question to ask Sam, when she’s human again. Does she feel like a dog sometimes?

Cat hopes that’s not offensive.

But because she’s become keenly aware that it’s *Sam*, Cat gently disengages from the wrestling on her bed, sitting up. Sam sits next to her on the bed, head tilted questioningly, and Cat reaches over to pet the fur on the back of her neck and her shoulders.

And though they were just touching a lot as they wrestled in the aftermath of their chasing game, this is the first time Cat is really touching Sam while having the chance to *think* about the fact that she’s touching Sam. Her fur is a little wiry at the top, but with a soft and thick layer beneath that Cat lets her fingers sink into. Sam leans into her hand. Cat reflects at how Sam always seems reluctant to allow Cat to hug her, giving her time limits, reminding Cat that she’s “not a hugger,” but right now, Sam doesn’t seem to mind Cat touching her at all.

Cat revels in it. “You’re really soft,” she finally says, when she’s been petting Sam in silence for long enough that it feels weird.

Sam huffs at that, eyes narrowed as if she’s offended.

“What? It’s a compliment,” Cat insists, instinctively moving her hand to scratch behind Sam’s ears.

The way Sam’s tail thumps tells Cat that she likes it, a lot.

But honestly it’s all a little overwhelming. Cat has so many questions, and no way to get answers, and though she isn’t *confusing* Sam for a dog, the similarities between them are a bit difficult to wrap her mind around. She decides she should probably stop treating Sam like a pet, as much as they both seem to enjoy it. So Cat gets up from the bed. “Should we watch a movie?” she suggests.

Sam cocks her head with interest, and follows Cat out front to the living room once again, curling up on one half of the sofa while Cat joins her with a bowl of popcorn not long after. Predictably, Sam still ends up eating most of the popcorn, but only because Cat lets her. Because, really, Cat has to feed it to her.

It honestly feels like almost any other night, watching a movie with Sam, except Sam can’t make snarky asides, or give the characters unsolicited advice.

And Sam ends up with her head in Cat’s lap. *That* doesn’t normally happen, either.

Cat likes that Sam seems more affectionate as a wolf.

She also wonders if it means anything. Yet another question she can’t ask.

After their movie, they watch some TV for a little while until Cat starts to get sleepy. Sam seems amenable to bedtime at this point, too, though obviously, she can’t get ready for bed in *quite* the same way Cat does.

They’ve been so cuddly all evening that Cat is tempted to invite Sam to snuggle in bed with her, but Cat is trying to make sure she’s being appropriate with Sam, and not invalidating her humanity. As the evening went on, she’d tried to picture any of their interactions as if Sam was a human, and judge whether Cat would still act the same way. It seemed to help, sort of, and it helps now as Cat avoids inviting Sam into bed with her. Though they’ve shared a bed before, it wouldn’t be the same.

Instead, Sam jumps up onto her own bed, dragging her Union Jack blanket over herself with her teeth as she curls up. Cat watches her get comfortable, then says, “Good night.”

Sam emits a small bark in return, and Cat curls up in bed, smiling.

She decides that she has to let Sam make the next move. Because it seems, to her, that there *is* a next move to come. But if Sam is the one with the “can’t” problem, then Sam is the one who has to decide she “can.”

But Cat decides that one thing *she* can do is let Sam know that nothing has changed about her feelings. And as she falls asleep, she starts to plan an event in which she can both do that and make up for the fact that she didn't get Sam a Christmas present.

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[A postcard featuring a digital drawing of the Power Plant behind a historic ship in Baltimore, MD's, inner harbor, the word "Baltimore" boldly spelled out above it]

It's weird how these cities kinda start to look the same but also kinda don't. The skylines, the waterfronts, the historic buildings that have the same feeling even if they look different. When it comes down to it cities are where a bunch of people live too close together. Maybe I'm just used to it, but I kind of like cities. Probably all the great food to be honest. I think I'm still high off of the two dozen amazing crabs I just ate. Life changing. Do you even have crabs in Italy?

-

When Sam wakes up around dawn, naked and half-covered by her blanket, she has a feeling she's going to be subjected to a lot of questions today.

But, hopefully, later. Because her first order of business is to put clothes on.

She stirs as quietly as she can, lifting her head and gazing across the room to where Cat is, apparently, sound asleep. Sam feels a smile tug at the corners of her mouth, remembering the evening before, in which she and Cat had just...hung out. But, like, with Sam as a wolf. It *did* feel different, as things often do when Sam is in her wolf form. It sort of reminds her of those early days with Carly, though that was also impacted by the fact that Carly was struggling to keep Spencer from finding out that Sam was literally *being a wolf* in her bedroom. But otherwise, it was very similar, the way they'd played and hung out. The biggest difference in both cases was that Sam could really only communicate through her body language, which could be challenging, but Cat, like Carly, seems fairly adept at reading her.

Sam wraps herself in her blanket and carefully eases down off of her bed, not wanting to wake up Cat. She quietly gathers some pajamas from her laundry chair, crosses the room for some clean underwear out of her dresser, and slips into the bathroom to put everything on in private.

Once she's dressed, she flops back onto her bed and closes her eyes. She stretches her limbs, getting used to the feel of her human body again, and finds herself grinning into her pillow, still thinking of the night before. How easy and natural it had felt to be *herself* with Cat.

Cat really is special. And whatever questions she has today, Sam is going to be as honest as she can with her.

Sam manages to fall back to sleep, and wakes up ravenous. Changing always takes a bit of a toll on her energy reserves, and last night is no exception. But as she sits up and takes stock of her surroundings, she quickly realizes that Cat is already awake, because she's not in her neatly-made bed, and that she can smell bacon and coffee.

Sam rushes out to the kitchen eagerly. Cat looks over from the stove and beams at her as she stops on the other side of the kitchen island, much like the evening before, except without trying to keep her balance with her four fluffy limbs sliding on a polished wood floor.

“Good morning!” Cat chirps, reaching over to pour a cup of coffee from the carafe. “Did you sleep well?”

“Fine, yeah,” Sam confirms, taking a seat at the breakfast bar while Cat passes her a cup of coffee. “What’s all this?”

“I thought you might be hungry.”

“You know I’m *always* hungry.”

“Yeah, but, I thought you might be *more* hungry.”

Well. She’s right. Cat can be oddly intuitive sometimes, but then, maybe it’s not such a stretch. Wolves and hunger often go hand in hand in their popular portrayal. Wolf down. Wolfish. Sam eyes the stove as well as she can with Cat in front of it. “Do I smell bacon? And eggs?”

“You do!” Cat grins over her shoulder before turning her attention back to the stove, and Sam hears the sizzle of bacon as she flips it over in the hot pan.

Moments later, the food is plated and in front of Sam, and Cat is joining her with her own plate. Sam takes a bite and grunts in satisfaction.

It’s kind of perfect. Not just the fact that it’s a high-protein meal, which is always good during the full moon, but the fact that Cat makes everything so damn *delicious*.

They eat quietly, any conversation staying very light, until Sam has cleared her plate and finished a cup and a half of coffee. Cat puts the dishes in the dishwasher while Sam tops off her coffee cup, but then, Cat turns toward her abruptly.

“So,” Cat starts slowly, blinking coyly and gazing at Sam with interest.

But Sam is ready for this. “Come on, let’s sit,” she gestures to the couch.

Sam sits on one end of the couch, with one foot on the cushion in front of her, though she leaves room for Cat to join her on the other end of the couch. She’s less nervous to answer questions than she expected to be. In fact, she’s a little excited. It’s *nice* to finally be able to talk to someone about this again. It’s been way too long that it’s been her own secret, alone, because until she left Seattle, it had *never* been something that was only hers. Carly had always been there with her, as integrated into her secret as possible.

And now Cat is, too. Sam takes a sip of coffee and nods, setting her cup on the table next to them. “Okay,” she prompts, “Ask me anything you want.”

Cat nods thoughtfully, still eyeing Sam, a gaze that’s almost too intense, so Sam looks away, over at the blank TV, just to divert her attention away from Cat’s warm, dark eyes that are full

of intrigue. Finally, Cat asks, “What’s it like?”

Sam blinks, her gaze shifting back over to Cat. “What do you mean?”

Cat shrugs. “I just keep thinking about what it would be like to...be a wolf, and it’s really hard to imagine.”

This isn’t where Sam thought Cat would start, and she considers how to answer the question. “It’s different,” she starts, then immediately rolls her eyes at herself. “Obviously,” she adds quickly. “It’s hard to explain, too, because like, my mind works differently when I’m a wolf. I’m a lot more...sensory, I guess? Like you know how when you’re just going about your life you have like a running commentary in your head or whatever?”

Cat nods. “Sometimes it’s...kind of too much,” she discloses.

“I know what you mean,” Sam agrees. “But it’s not like my brain is...off, when I’m a wolf. It just works differently. It’s not a barrage of words, but it’s a barrage of like, smells and sounds and ideas of what they mean, instead. Like I said, different. But a lot of it is, I dunno, instinctive, I guess? Like even when I first changed, it was like I knew how to interpret smells, I knew how to walk around without losing my balance, stuff like that.”

“You remember the first time you changed?” Cat asks with interest.

Sam nods. “Yeah. I was like, eleven and a half, almost twelve.”

“Is that when you were bitten?” Cat asks.

Sam laughs, in spite of herself. “I wasn’t bitten. As far as anyone knows, that’s a myth. I was born a werewolf.”

“Really?” Cat’s eyes are wide, fascinated. “So then...”

“My mom and my sister are both werewolves, too,” Sam confirms the implied question.

“Wow.” Cat seems to take a moment to take that in. “No offense, but it makes some sense for you, but...not so much for Melanie. Well.” Cat frowns, and seems to reconsider her evaluation, “When she’s not pranking me, anyway.”

“Yeah,” Sam agrees. “Melanie...doesn’t like being a werewolf much,” she discloses. “But I do think getting to go wild like that was probably good for her.”

“So wait.” Cat is frowning a little bit now. “You’ve been a werewolf all your life, but you only changed when you were like twelve?”

“Yeah.” It seems obvious to Sam, but now that she thinks about it, she supposes there’s no real way for Cat to know when someone might start changing. “Seems to happen around puberty,” she explains.

“I guess I thought for a second there that it might happen your whole life.”

“Nah. I get why you’d think that, though. It *is* kind of weird that it just...happens to you one day. I guess it might make more sense if it just always happened.”

Cat nods. “And then there’d be werewolf puppies!”

Sam laughs. “None of those. Which is good. Human spawn is bad enough.”

Cat frowns. “Sam, we babysit kids for a living.”

“Something I gladly tolerate because I like having money.” Sam waves a hand. “Come on, what else do you want to know? You had a lot of questions last night.”

Cat stares past her pensively for a moment. “I don’t want you to take this the wrong way, but you’re...a little different, as a wolf.”

“Well, *yeah*,” Sam laughs, drawing her knee a little closer to herself as she settles further onto the couch. “Kinda thought we’d established that.”

“No, I mean...I don’t know. It’s dumb.”

Now Sam is just curious. “What’s dumb?” But Cat just shakes her head. “No, seriously, what are you talking about?”

“Sometimes, being with you felt *exactly* like being with *you*,” Cat gestures to Sam’s very human body. “And other times...you reminded me of a dog.”

Sam blinks. “And that’s...dumb?” Being called a dog isn’t exactly *flattering*, but the similarities between wolves and dogs are impossible to deny.

“I guess I just wasn’t expecting you to be so playful, and for it to be okay to touch you.”

Sam hadn’t really considered that part. She’s very used to existing in an altered form in which she is herself, just...a bit different. Being a wolf *does* bring out certain parts of herself that she doesn’t necessarily express the same way as a human. Or at all. But...like she’d told Cat, her mind works differently as a wolf. Things she’s aware of, under the surface, hit her much more forcefully when she’s less able to rationalize them away. She tries to explain. “It’s like, I don’t know, things just feel different. I mean, part of it is that I usually have a lot more energy as a wolf, so getting you to chase me was good release for that. And...” she trails off, trying to think of how to express an experience that is very much not one she ties to language when she is a wolf, the experience of being touched by someone she is close to. Eventually, she just shrugs. “It just feels nicer to be touched when I’m a wolf. So I seek it out a little more.”

“Oh, okay,” Cat nods, seeming relieved by Sam’s answer. “I just didn’t know if I was treating you weird, or something,” she admits.

“Felt fine to me,” Sam waves her hand in a conciliatory gesture. “So, come on, what else?”

Cat thinks about it for a moment, then starts, “The Throbbing Moon...”

“Yeah?” Sam prompts when the silence stretches, wondering what about it Cat is curious about. “The moon always seems to throb for me, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

“Wow,” Cat comments, but then shakes her head. “You said that you don’t have to change every time there’s a full moon. So you didn’t for the Throbbing Moon, right?”

“Yeah,” Sam confirms, “I took wolfsbane. That’s the thing that makes it so I don’t always have to change.”

“But Sam, you were *weird* that night. Wasn’t that the night you locked yourself in the safe room?”

Sam huffs out a short chuckle. “Yeah, so, about that. Wolfsbane...isn’t perfect. And when you use it, especially when you use it a lot, you won’t change, but you won’t quite be fully human either. And I’d been using it a lot, so, I was pretty wild that night. It was kinda rough.”

“You’d been using it a lot?” Cat frowns. “But it felt to me like you’d been disappearing overnight a lot. Like, once a month a lot.”

Sam realizes there’s another detail that Cat is missing, one that seems so commonplace to her but that Cat would have no reason to know. “Thing is, there are three nights to every full moon,” she explains. “So, yeah, I left about once a month. But that means I took wolfsbane and stayed home twice. And there was one month in there where I stayed home all three nights because you were getting so suspicious.” Privately, she considers the fact that she’s kind of running low on wolfsbane, but...that’s a problem for another time, and not something she needs Cat to worry about.

Cat stares, “Does that mean you’re going to change again tonight?”

“Yep,” Sam confirms, “And Sunday night, too.”

Cat sits back, taking that all in. “Wow,” she comments, “I had no idea that you’d had to do that.”

“Yeah, that’s kind of the point of keeping this kind of thing a secret,” Sam replies dryly. “But you know what?” Cat turns to look at her, dark doe eyes curious, sweet, and utterly unafraid. “I’m glad it’s not a secret I’m keeping from you anymore.”

Cat smiles, dimple standing out on her cheek. “Me, too.” She reaches out a hand, touches Sam’s knee, one of those unconscious affectionate gestures that come so easily from Cat.

Sam remembers how that hand had felt on her back, in her fur, the night before, and feels warm.

“I’m just happy that everything kind of makes *sense* now,” Cat gushes. “I thought that...” she trails off. Sam tilts her head to the side, waiting to see if she’ll continue, and after a hesitation, Cat elaborates, “I thought that you just...didn’t want to be around me. Like you had to get away from me.”

Sam shakes her head. “Nah. I just didn’t want to freak you out. Also, you know, secret. We’re not supposed to tell, like, regular humans about us.”

“Have you ever told anyone before?” Cat asks with interest.

“Once. Kind of accidentally.” Sam takes a deep breath. She hadn’t really planned to go into all of this, but she can keep it simple. “The first time I changed, I kind of did it in front of Carly,” she reveals. “I didn’t know what to expect, didn’t know it was happening, and she was there for me.”

“Wow,” Cat says again. “So Carly knows?”

“Yeah.” Sam decides to leave it at that.

“I guess that makes sense,” Cat decides. “She’s your best friend, after all.”

Sam doesn’t reply to that, because of the bitterness that wells up in her throat, at the fact that her best friend *abandoned* her. Intellectually, she understands, and she doesn’t want to hold a grudge, but her heart hasn’t caught up with her mind yet when it comes to Carly.

Cat seems lost in thought for a long moment, and when she realizes Sam is watching her, she smiles. “Sorry. I’m just...taking everything in,” she explains. “I know I’ll probably have more questions later, but I feel like that’s enough for now.”

“Okay,” Sam agrees.

“What do you want to do tonight?” Cat asks.

Sam shrugs, “I can stay in and change again, if you don’t mind another night with a wolf.” Her tone is casual. “I can also take wolfsbane if you just want a normal night. Or I can go out.”

“You should stay home,” Cat suggests. “And, you should change.”

Sam blinks. “You actually want to hang out with a wolf?”

“Yeah,” Cat replies, “I really do.”

Sam tries to hide the smile that threatens to emerge. “Okay,” she agrees, shrugging like it’s no big deal.

But as much as she doesn’t want to show it, Cat’s acceptance means a lot.

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[A postcard depicting an artist’s rendering of flowering cherry blossoms over the the Lincoln Memorial and Reflecting Pool, the Jefferson Memorial, the Washington Monument, the Capitol building and the White House, from Washington, D.C.]

Okay is DC a state? I don't think it is but I don't understand why not. Like the car license plates have it on them. Anyway, I got this because I couldn't remember if it counted or not. I know that this is supposed to be, like, the place where everything happens but it's honestly kind of boring. A bunch of museums and stuff. I know, I know if you were here you'd probably find a way to get me to go to each one, but...oh well. I went to DC and learned nothing.

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That evening is spent much like the previous one, and, of course, Cat thinks of more questions to ask when Sam can't answer. Especially during the part of the evening when Sam gets really playful. Cat wonders if maybe Sam would enjoy some dog toys or if that's...too much. But Sam hadn't seemed at all offended by the notion that she reminds Cat of a dog sometimes, so maybe it's okay to ask.

Or...maybe not, because when Cat asks it, Sam lunges at her and manages to pin her down on the sofa.

"Okay, okay," Cat laughs, "forget I asked."

But Sam backs away, sitting down on her haunches, and tilts her head to the side, regarding Cat curiously.

"You're thinking about it, aren't you?" Cat asks, watching Sam as she sits back up on the sofa.

Sam shakes her whole body, as if shaking off the entire notion, and sprints toward the bedroom, eager for a chase, but Cat is certain that the idea has at least taken hold.

By bedtime, Cat thinks that she could absolutely get used to this. She *loves* learning about this new facet of Sam, and she cherishes that Sam trusts her enough to share this with her. She does miss that Sam can't talk to her, at least not directly, but they're learning to communicate, all the same.

And Cat...*feels* something in the air between them. It's not the electricity in the air that she would feel sometimes before they kissed. It's more like...a cocoon, like they're safe and warm together and nothing can disturb them (and not just because they've locked up the house, just in case Dice tries to burst in; this isn't something they can easily explain away). That feeling of intimacy permeates everything, and Cat feels like Sam is opening up to her in new ways. She's always been so taciturn about her life, about Seattle, about pretty much anything that happened before she showed up in Los Angeles and dragged Cat out of a trash truck, but it feels like Cat is slowly gaining ground with Sam, building trust, getting closer.

Maybe the fact that Sam as a wolf seems to want *all* her attention contributes to it.

But the next day, Sam explains that she should probably spend some time alone and will be going out all night again.

“Oh.” Cat tries not to sound too dejected, but she’d thought they were past the times that Sam disappeared overnight and left Cat alone.

Sam clearly reads her disappointment and reaches out to take Cat’s shoulders in her hands. “Hey, it’s not because I’m trying to get away from you,” she reassures. “It’s just that as much fun as we’ve had running around the apartment, I’m still pretty amped. I need to go run around outside where there’s *space* to really do it. And I can’t take you with me.”

“Why not?” Cat asks, mildly petulant.

“Uh, well, first of all, because the places I go, humans aren’t supposed to be after dark, so you could get in trouble. You can’t sense things and hide like I can. And you don’t know how to ride a motorcycle so you can’t take my bike home when you’re done being outside. And I’m not letting you spend the night outdoors.”

Cat sighs heavily. These are good reasons, though that doesn’t make it any easier for her to acquiesce to Sam’s plan. “I guess you’re right,” she says glumly.

“Wish you could come with me,” Sam drops her hands from Cat’s shoulders, gaze dropping with them. “We’ve had fun these past couple of nights.”

“Yeah,” Cat smiles, looking away from Sam herself. “We have.”

“But it’s not as though I can just, like, run around the streets of Venice.”

“I guess not...” Cat trails off, and her eyes snap back up to Sam as an idea strikes her. “Or can we?”

“Um, I’m pretty sure no,” Sam side-eyes her, heavily skeptical.

“Okay, but what if we went to the beach?”

Sam gazes at her, highly skeptical. “The beach,” she repeats flatly.

“Yeah! We could leave late enough at night that there won’t be as many people out.”

“You have school tomorrow,” Sam points out.

“So do you,” Cat counters, which Sam can’t really argue with. “The beach is open all night. I don’t think a lot of people will bother us, especially because it’ll be cold.”

“Maybe for you,” Sam eyes her. “You’d need to bundle up.”

“I will. And if I ride my bike there and you run along next to me, we’ll be moving so fast that no one will question anything.”

“Yeah, but...Cat, I don’t *look* like a dog.”

“Not close up you don’t, no. But from far away I don’t think anyone will notice anything.”

Sam chews her lip. “This seems like a terrible idea.”

Cat shrugs. “When has that stopped us before?”

The logic seems to appease them both, and the plan is in place. As sunset draws nearer, Cat asks curiously, “Can I see you change this time?”

Sam eyes her thoughtfully, then shrugs. “I mean. I guess so. It’s pretty weird looking,” she warns.

“That’s okay,” Cat assures her. “I’ve watched Jade’s short films. I can handle weird-looking.”

Sam grins, “Fair point. Um, I’ll let you know when?”

Sam goes back into the bedroom after a bit, and when she calls to Cat, Cat is ready. She walks through the bedroom door to find Sam, standing nude in the middle of the room. “Oh,” she breathes out. Even though she’d seen Sam’s pile of clothes from the other times she changed, she kind of forgot to expect that Sam would be naked.

Sam, however, doesn’t seem to care at all about her state of undress. She only says, in a voice that sounds lower, harsher, “It’s about to happen.” Her eyes seem bright, a paler blue than usual, and she’s breathing hard, like she’s just finished sprinting somewhere, and her teeth are bared in an inhuman sort of grin.

Cat idly takes in all of her smooth, pale skin, blushing as she lets her eyes dip to Sam’s chest. She knows now is not the time to ogle her roommate, but she’s undeniably curious about Sam’s unclothed body. She tries to keep her focus on Sam’s face, since Sam is watching her, and she sees the way a shudder seems to ripple over Sam, rhythmic, from her head down to her legs.

Abruptly, Sam’s body jolts, like a harder version of that same shudder, and she hunches forward slightly, shoulders rolling with the motion. Cat notices that her skin is changing color; it’s subtle, like a light tan that starts at Sam’s chest and spreads to cover her arms, and Cat realizes what’s happening just as the golden fur begins sprout from her skin, and Sam begins to bend even further forward until her hands, already halfway to paws, meet the floor.

If it weren’t strange enough to see, Cat can also *hear* it—the strange body sounds, creaks and pops, gurgles and harsh exhales, and other unidentifiable sounds as Sam’s body changes shape. Her face is starting to change more drastically now, before remaining disturbingly almost-human, as her chin pushes forward, her muzzle grows, her ears lengthen and literally seem to slide into their new position at the top of her head. And, almost as an afterthought, Sam’s tail seems to spring out from the end of her spine, fluffy and long and already wagging with the joy of being a wolf.

Sam shakes out her body, and the way it starts at her head and ripples down to her tail, it almost reminds Cat of the shudder that passed through her body at the beginning of her transformation. And then Sam watches her curiously, head tilted.

“Wow,” is all Cat can think of to say. It’s hard to understand how she can find human Sam so damn attractive, and her wolf form so elegant and graceful and, frankly, beautiful, for all its weird proportions, yet the transformation between the two to be utterly grotesque. “You weren’t wrong about it being weird-looking.”

Sam emits a slight whine, approaching to nose at Cat’s palm.

Cat kneels down next to her, patting her head and scratching behind her ears. “I’m glad I watched,” Cat admits. “So that I know what it’s like.” She’s being honest. Even though Sam has been openly a werewolf in front of her for a few days, watching it happen makes it feel much more real. She appreciates that Sam was willing to share something so profound with her.

Sam sits back on her haunches and looks at her, eyes almost pleading.

Cat hugs her around the neck, an expression of affection and gratitude, and on impulse, kisses the fur there. “Come on,” she coaxes, “I’m going to start making dinner, and you can watch!”

Sam bounds up onto her hind legs excitedly, and romps out the door ahead of Cat.

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[A postcard featuring a black and white road map over the word Harrisonburg in stark black lettering from Harrisonburg, VA]

C

Going from the bustle of cities like NYC, Baltimore, DC into...kind of a lot of nothing. I mean that’s not totally true but I’ve seen a lot of farmland and stuff too. It’s weird when I think about how somebody has to like, grow all the food I eat? I miss your brother’s spaghetti tacos. I miss cooking with you. I miss your full fridge. I’m not even going to say it because I know you know.

S

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By the time they’re getting ready to go on their walk on the beach, Sam is positive that this is a terrible idea. But, for some reason, she also can’t seem to say no to it. Just like she hadn’t been able to say no to Cat watching her change. She doesn’t regret it; she wouldn’t have suggested it herself, but if Cat wanted to see, well. Sam figured she should see the ugliness that was part of being a werewolf, too. It isn’t all romps through the woods and howling at the moon. Sometimes, it’s downright disturbing. And besides, Carly had seen her change from almost day one and it hadn’t ever seemed to bother her.

If she wants Cat to accept her, she wants Cat to accept her *fully*. And, from the kiss she heard more than felt against the thick fur of her neck, Sam thinks that Cat just might.

At this point, she’s already been a wolf for several hours, in which they ate some dinner and then both dozed on the couch for a little bit, but it’s just after midnight, and Cat is preparing

to leave the apartment.

“Okay,” she says, “I’ll ride and you can run along next to me. We’ll just keep moving and we’ll go to the most secluded part of the beach we can get to.”

Sam sits and cocks her head. She assumes the beach won’t be that active at this hour, but who knows? She wonders whether it’s a good idea for Cat to appear to be a young woman alone with a dog out somewhere private at night. But Sam also knows that she can certainly hold her own in a fight, whether she’s a wolf or a human, so Cat will be safe.

Cat regards her thoughtfully. “We should have gotten you a vest or something. Like what service dogs wear. It might distract from your, um, weird proportions,” she waves vaguely at Sam. Sam growls faintly, offended, but Cat merely laughs. “It’ll be fine, though. It’ll be mostly dark and I don’t think anyone will look too closely.”

Maybe she’s trying to convince herself that this is a good idea as much as she’s trying to convince Sam. Well, it isn’t as though they have another choice. Sam needs to expend some energy and this is the only option they’ve left themselves.

Her agitated state becomes apparent when she can’t help but dance excitedly near the door as Cat puts on her coat, signaling that it’s just about time to leave. Cat giggles as she watches her. “Okay, okay, Sam, don’t worry, we’re leaving.”

As soon as the patio door is open, Sam sprints out, past her motorcycle and Cat’s bicycle, and into the alley behind the apartment. She waits, ears perked, until Cat follows her, on her bike, and then the two of them start toward the beach together, Sam keeping pace with Cat’s riding speed. She could easily outpace Cat if she wanted to, but she doesn’t, she just moves alongside her, hoping that the normalcy of...a girl riding her bike in the middle of the night with her gangly dog beside her will shield Sam from unnecessary scrutiny.

Yeah, okay, when she puts it that way, it seems ridiculous.

But Sam’s senses are alert for danger, and she never smells anyone awake and alert nearby, she never has a sense that anyone even looks their way. She assumes that most people in the houses they move past are asleep, or distracted by their phones, not staring out their windows.

Maybe this is actually safer than Sam anticipated.

Their apartment isn’t that far from the beach, technically walkable, if anyone in LA actually walked anywhere. Cat takes them a little further down from the main drag of the Venice Beach boardwalk, where it’s quieter (not that it’s especially busy, compared to how it is during the day). But Sam doesn’t sense much scrutiny from the people around them here, either. She guesses maybe Cat was right. Maybe no one is really paying them any mind.

They go down to the beach, which is mostly empty, aside from people drinking or smoking together (Sam can strongly smell the cannabis), couples hooking up, a few people walking. She and Cat carve out their own little section of the beach; since they, like pretty much

everyone else out here tonight, want their privacy, it's as simple as heading toward a deserted section and trusting everyone else to keep their distance.

"So." Cat has been walking her bike on the beach and is now trying to get the kickstand to work properly in the shifting sand, "Now what?" she asks.

In response, Sam sprints toward the ocean, plunging headfirst into a wave. It's *cold*. But Sam's body is built for the cold, and after the shock of it hits her, there's stasis in its wake, her undercoat keeping her skin insulated. She bounds back out of the water to shake off the excess water and trots toward Cat excitedly, feeling her tail wag.

Cat grins, "We should have brought a tennis ball." Sam whines, both at the missed opportunity and because, well, even though it's useless to protest, she still voices her displeasure at being compared to a pet. Cat is completely unfazed though. "Maybe I can find a stick or something," she suggests.

Sam gazes around at the beach, which is more or less spotless sand as far as she can see. Yeah, not really the type of beach where you might find sticks. Or really much of anything. She turns skeptical eyes to Cat.

"Okay, maybe not," Cat agrees. "I could try to chase you? But it's hard to run in sand."

That's enough for Sam, who runs a few paces away then turns to yip softly at Cat, encouraging the chase. Cat hesitates, gazing down at her sneakers, but then she's moving after Sam, an excited shriek escaping her despite her slow speed.

They romp around on the beach together for a while, Sam running circles around Cat, dashing into the ocean to escape her—since Cat is definitely not going anywhere near the water when it's this cold. Cat's laughter seems like the only sound, the joy tethering them is the only thing Sam cares about, in this moment.

It's enough that she lets her guard down.

The sound of a male voice snaps her back to vigilance. "Hey, I think you're supposed to leash that dog—Cat?"

It takes Sam a moment to register that the voice is familiar, and by then, her hackles have already risen, a thrum of anxiety bunching her muscles as she curses the fact that she had been so *careless*.

"Oh, hi, Herb!" Cat greets the older man with the bushy beard who lives near them. She steps in front of Sam as she does so, which Sam doesn't like, but allows in order to stay somewhat shielded from Herb.

It at least makes sense to Sam that Herb's presence wouldn't have alerted her to any danger. The man is eccentric but utterly harmless. Still, she doesn't like that he managed to get so close without her noticing anything.

“I didn’t know you had a dog,” Herb comments, stepping over to get a better look at Sam. “What breed is he?”

While Sam bristles slightly at the assumption that she’s a boy, Cat replies, “She’s an, um, Northwestern Puckle,” while glancing at Sam with a grimace.

“Never heard of that breed,” Herb says thoughtfully. Sam takes off toward the surf so that Herb can’t study her further, but she can still hear every word the two of them say.

“I might have the breed wrong,” Cat amends. “She’s not mine. I’m dogsitting.”

“I thought you were babysitters,” Herb says uncertainly.

“Well, you know. Babies. Dogs.” Cat shrugs. “What’s the difference, really?”

“It’s pretty late to be dogsitting, especially by yourself,” Herb sounds concerned.

“Oh, Sam is around here somewhere,” Cat replies airily.

“Of course she is.” There’s a smile in Herb’s tone. “Well, don’t stay out too late, especially not with an unleashed dog. Could get a citation on this beach. It’s always crawling with cops.”

“I hadn’t thought of that. Thanks, Herb,” Cat says, turning toward Sam. “Come here, Santa…Maria,” Cat calls haltingly.

“Well, I’m going back to my condo. You okay to get home?” Herb asks.

“Yeah, we’re fine,” Cat assures him. “Sam, um, will be right over, and I’ll be safe with her.”

“No doubt about that. Take care. I know I am. My life’s going great!” And with those parting words, Herb begins striding across the sand away from them.

Sam shakes the excess water off of her fur and approaches Cat, who kneels in front of her to speak quietly. “That was close,” Cat murmurs. “But I don’t think Herb suspected anything.”

Sam hadn’t gotten the sense that he had, either, but she’s still on edge from the interaction. She lifts her lip in a silent snarl that expresses her mood.

Cat reaches over fearlessly to stroke her head soothingly. “Okay, well, lesson learned, I guess. Are you ready to head back?”

Sam usually runs around for longer on a wolf night, but since she hadn’t taken wolfsbane this month, she feels like she’s expended enough energy. And also, yeah, the encounter with Herb has her feeling much less safe out in the open like this. Her hackles still haven’t fully lowered, and at this point, she can’t understand how she ever felt like this was a good idea.

But as she leans against the hand currently scratching her behind her ears, she remembers, because the warmth of Cat’s presence slowly calms her. Until Cat stands up. “Okay,” she says, walking back over toward where she’d left her bike, “Let’s head home.”

By the time they head home and get ready for bed, it's pushing two in the morning. Sam knows Cat has to get up for school in only a few hours, and she's grateful that she'd wanted to spend the evening with her.

Cat is tucked into her bed, smiling sleepily at Sam, who is just about to jump up onto her own bed. "Goodnight, Sam," Cat says softly, voice full of affection.

Sam can't explain the impulse, because it's one that comes purely from the wolf side of her, but in moments, she's across the room, front paws on the edge of Cat's bed, about to jump up and join her.

The more rational part of her mind stops her, reminding her that as wonderful as it would feel to snuggle with Cat, Sam is going to wake up a naked human woman in a few hours. She stares down at Cat, who is looking at her with wide, curious eyes.

Sam presses her nose against Cat's neck in a gesture of appreciation, making Cat giggle, and sniffs deeply, letting all the affection and security and protectiveness run through her. She feels Cat's hands on her back, fingers in her fur, and stays there for just a moment, hoping that this is enough to express her gratitude.

She pulls away and hops up onto her bed, covering herself as well as she can, and though Sam just spent the evening splashing through the frigid Pacific surf on a winter evening and felt fine, it feels like even her undercoat can't keep her warm in her cold bed that night.

Blue

[A postcard depicting a photograph from a lookout of a horseshoe-shaped river wrapping around a small mountain. The text beneath it says “Grandview State Park, Beaver, WV”]

Okay I swear to you I passed a place called “Rich Hole” but there really wasn’t anywhere to buy a postcard. But I thought of you. And I didn’t even realize I was in Beaver until I saw this postcard for the nearby state park and, well, close enough, right? Yes I’m still laughing at dirty place names but I’m pretty sure you are, too.

Sam

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They get through Monday, with Cat heading off to school a little sleep deprived, and Sam sleeping in probably later than she should before attending online school. Usually, Sam doesn’t mind much when the full moon is over. As much as she enjoys being a wolf, it’s just honestly a lot more convenient to go through life in a human body. It’s exactly why wolfsbane was developed. To help preserve secrecy and also because, well, as much as becoming a wolf is deeply fulfilling and satisfies a primal piece of self-identity...it’s just not all that convenient a lot of the time.

So Sam is largely fine with staying human. But this week, it feels...almost disappointing.

She was aware that telling Cat her secret would change things between them. And over the weekend, it felt like they were growing closer and closer, the way spilled secrets usually bond people. It feels different now that Sam isn’t turning into a wolf every night, though. It’s not the same as before she told Cat her secret, but...something is missing, and she can’t put her finger on what.

On Thursday, Cat comes home carrying shopping bags she won’t let Sam poke around in, because, she says, there might be a surprise for Sam in there. This just makes Sam all the more curious and she playfully tries to convince Cat to let her peek, following Cat across the room as she just as lightheartedly denies Sam.

And Cat reveals that Sam has to wait to open her present until Yay Day, which is a new holiday she made up. Well, that seems par for the course for Cat, but it’s hard to be excited about it when it just means Sam has to wait to get a present.

As Sam reclines on the couch with her feet in front of her, Cat starts trying to explain the inspiration for her new holiday, the purpose of which seems to just be gift giving. She asks Sam the best part of Christmas, to which Sam answers, “Pie,” and the best part of birthdays, which yields, “Cake.”

“Presents!” Cat insists. Sam concedes the point, though reluctantly, as she moves her feet to make room for Cat on the other end of the couch, willingly, and Cat continues to explain,

“Since everybody loves presents, why not create a holiday that’s just about presents?”

“Yay Day,” Sam finishes her thought.

“Exactly! Because what do people say when they get presents?” Cat asks.

“Yippee,” Sam suggests, trying to hide her smirk as she teases Cat.

Cat seems disappointed that she isn’t playing along and quietly replies, “No.”

“Wahoo,” Sam needles her again.

“No!” Cat draws the word out in mild frustration.

“Mazel tov,” is Sam’s final suggestion.

At first it seems like Cat isn’t even going to dignify that with a response as she pouts adorably, but then she insists, “People say ‘Yay!’ Come on, say it with me.” And she starts to cheer “Yay!” toward the ceiling until she realizes Sam isn’t playing along, and is instead trying not to smile at how adorable Cat is being as she tries to get Sam excited about her made up holiday. “You’re not saying it with me,” Cat accuses expectantly.

“Will you just give me my present?” Sam demands. It’s not as if Cat doesn’t know that waiting isn’t her strong suit.

“Yes. On Yay Day,” Cat smiles invitingly. “Which I declare is this Saturday.” She looks very satisfied.

“Don’t you mean...Satuyay?” Sam jokes, wanting Cat to know she’s willing to play along with some of this.

Cat bursts into laughter, but then grabs Sam’s shin and abruptly becomes serious. “Don’t joke about Yay Day.”

Well, okay. It isn’t unlike Cat to be mercurial, to be oddly fixated on the strangest things. Sam decides she’ll do her best to indulge her.

There *is* a present in it for her, after all.

That cooperation is sorely tested when Sam wakes up the next morning covered in balloons. It’s Friday, and Cat has the day off from school, so Sam figured she’d take the day off, too, and they’d sleep in. But Cat certainly seems to have gotten up at her normal time considering what Sam comes up front to find: a “Yay Berry Bush” covered with a lot of weird hand-crafted ornaments and a light up sign that says “YAY” above it, not to mention the balloons and foil curtains and feather decorations all over the front of the house, and the fact that Dice and Goomer are over.

And, oh yeah, Sam has balloons tied all over her body. Which she assures Cat she is going to pop with a fork.

It's enough to make her want to refuse to participate in Yay Day altogether, and she tries to get out of it, though Cat is clearly disappointed. But Dice and Goomer have apparently already bought her Yay Day presents, so Sam decides she'll celebrate this silly made up holiday after all. Maybe it's because popping the balloons with a fork is almost fun.

But, she's not quite ready to play along completely. So Sam announces that she will be buying everyone Yay Day presents except for Cat.

Cat looks pained. "Why not me?"

"Because *you* are a dirty snooper," Sam accuses.

Cat is scandalized for a moment, but ultimately, she confesses that she is, indeed, a dirty snooper. Sam explains to Goomer that last time she tried to give Cat a present (it wasn't a *big deal* or anything, she just saw something that reminded her of Cat and the money she'd made working for Peezy B was burning a hole in her pocket), Cat snooped in her closet and opened it before Sam could give it to her. Cat tries to defend herself by claiming the baby unicorn wrapping paper Sam had chosen was too irresistible.

But Sam doesn't accept Cat's excuse, and informs Cat that because she had ruined the surprise, Sam isn't going to get her any more presents. It's not the first time she's made this statement, and it was part of why she'd insisted Christmas be about spending time together instead of buying things (though she hadn't presented it that way to Cat). The budget had been a convenient excuse. They could've easily exchanged presents with the amount it cost to go to the movies and out to dinner that day.

When it comes down to it, though, Sam doesn't have the heart to *actually* put a damper on the holiday Cat is so clearly excited about. After letting Cat get upset about her own snooping problem—hoping the reminder of how Sam had been disappointed would be enough to help Cat resist, this time—Sam agrees that she'll buy Cat a present, too.

After all, she already knows exactly what to get for her. Cat is easy to shop for if you pay attention. And Sam pays attention.

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[A postcard depicting the Louisville skyline at night, lights from the buildings reflecting onto the Ohio river with the Clark Memorial Bridge in the foreground, a big full moon overhead. At the top in slender, understated letters the postcard reads "Louisville, Kentucky"]

Carly

There were plenty of postcards with horses and stuff, which would've made sense, but then I saw this one and, well, it seemed to fit us better. When you ride across the country things can change so gradually that you don't notice until you get somewhere and...bam. You realize you're in the south. I mean, I have been for a bit now, but... anyway, it's hard to explain. But I'll tell you what I already can tell they know how to do meat down here.

Your meat loving friend, Sam

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The curiosity is killing Cat. Sam bought her a *present*. Cat has one for her, too, and she knows the meaning hers holds, and she is *dying* to know if Sam's present has a similar kind of significance.

Cat is well aware that it's difficult for her not to snoop. It always has been. Secrets, in general, are a challenge for her, and what is a present but a secret in pretty paper? But when peppering Sam with questions gets her no closer to any kind of hint about what Sam bought for her, Cat finds she can't resist actually taking a peek at the gift itself.

If she's honest, it was probably always going to come to this. Cat is putting her heart on the line with her Yay Day present. She needs to be certain it's going to be worth it.

So Cat gets out of bed in the middle of the night and creeps in her quacking duck slippers to the front of the apartment to the Yay Berry Bush. Sam, unsurprisingly, snores through Cat leaving the bedroom. Dice, Goomer and Nona are in the living room and even though they're all sleeping in positions that don't look all that comfortable, they entirely sleep through Cat tiptoeing up to Sam's present and opening it to take a peek.

Only to discover...mouthwash. For people with terrible smelling breath.

Cat's heart sinks into her stomach like a stone. Is this really what Sam thinks of her?

The feeling only intensifies as Cat realizes the other half of the package contains foot wash.

Cat is offended and devastated. So Sam clearly thinks she smells terrible and is going to let everyone know it. Which is ridiculous because Cat always takes care of her hygiene. Sam's the one who doesn't always brush her teeth before bed! Granted, that's because sometimes she's a wolf at bedtime, but *still*. If anyone here is the *clean* one, it's Cat.

And as Cat tucks herself back into bed, heartbroken, it hits her.

What if this is Sam's *can't*?

What if the reason Sam doesn't want to kiss her ever again is because, to her sensitive wolf nose, Cat just *stinks* and there's nothing she can do about it?

Cat is too upset to cry as she seethes and struggles to fall back to sleep, but one thing is for certain, she is already over Yay Day.

Because of her nighttime snooping, Cat ends up sleeping in later than usual, and when she comes out the next morning, everyone's Yay Day joy is in full swing. Sam and Nona are even working together to make Yay Day fried pancakes, something that Cat had intended to do. She refuses the offered pancakes grumpily, but no one seems to notice her sour mood because they're all so excited to gather around the Yay Berry Bush and open presents.

They certainly notice when Cat refuses to join them for presents and tells them she doesn't care about Yay Day, but it's Sam who tries to stop her from actually walking away.

Fine. If Sam wants to exchange presents, Cat will do that.

She snatches up Sam's carefully selected present and marches back toward the bedroom. Sam grins and taps her arm as she passes by, but Cat just scowls at her.

Sam is going to be sorry she ever asked to exchange gifts with Cat, because Cat is sorry she ever fell in love with her.

In their bedroom, Cat opens the box she'd wrapped for Sam and takes out the new, expensive leather jacket she'd bought for her. She's not going to humiliate herself by giving Sam something so beautiful and heartfelt when Sam is going to give her something *insulting*. She shoves the jacket under her bed. Sam can open an empty box, as far as Cat's concerned, because that's all she feels for her anymore.

And just then, Herb knocks on their window with an opportunity. An old, nasty pillow (with stains) that he found on the street.

Cat trades Sam's new jacket for the pillow, though Herb is somewhat reluctant to take it, shoves the gross thing in the gift box, and heads back up front.

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[A postcard featuring an artistic rendering of the silhouettes of two people hiking in the mountains, among deer and slim trees and alongside a stream. The bottom text reads "Hoosier National Forest" in Indiana]

Okay I still don't even really understand Hoosier? What a weird word. Anyway, I have to hit a couple of states that are a little less southern first. This is one of them. But don't worry, the food here has been great. Needed a protein boost and I scraped clean this plate of sausage gravy and eggs and asked for another. The look the waitress gave me was hilarious, but you'd probably tell me I was embarrassing you. I guess at least I'm not there to embarrass you in someplace as sophisticated as Italy. ~~Maybe you're better off w~~

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"Okay," Cat calls as she comes out of the bedroom, "Here's my present for Sam!"

Where previously she had been so sulky and grouchy, she's all smiles now. Sam smiles back. Sam likes presents, in theory, but in the back of her mind, she's always worried about being let down by them. Most of the presents she'd ever gotten in her life had been sad and disappointing, it was only in the past couple of years that Carly had the spending money to buy gifts for Sam that were actually decent. And that's not including the wallet from this past Christmas that had sparked so many complicated feelings.

But, yeah, she and her sister never could afford to get each other presents growing up, and if their mom gave them anything, it was always one thing that she hyped up and then... something else was in the box that was unwanted and the juxtaposition was crushing.

Sam doesn't anticipate something like that from Cat, though. Because Cat is someone who she knows understands her.

"Here you go." Cat brings the present over to her. "Have at it!" she shouts, more aggressively than Sam thinks is really appropriate.

"Thanks," she replies, a little uncertainly. There's a prickle of awareness at the back of her neck. Their friends encourage her to open the gift, and Sam does, eager to see what Cat got for her. "Looks like Cat got me..." she trails off as she removes the tissue paper to reveal...a disgusting pillow. She looks under it, wondering if this is a joke.

"That's it." Cat points to the pillow.

"Uh." Sam takes the pillow out of the box, still trying to figure out *what* this gift even *is*. "Looks like Cat got me a dirty pillow," she informs everyone. "With stains. And hair." She looks up at Cat, baffled and repulsed.

"Hope you love it!" Cat's tone has a heavy tinge of sarcasm.

Sam...has no idea how to respond. It seems that no one else does, either, for a moment, until Dice suggests that Cat should open Sam's present.

"Oh, right, Dice! That's a great idea!" Cat shouts at him with similar aggression.

Sam can't understand what is happening. Cat had created an entire holiday revolving around the joy of gift giving only to present Sam with...this? She holds the pillow in her lap, unsure why she doesn't just...put it down. There has to be a purpose to this. Sam can hardly look at Cat. She'd gone out of her way to find a gift for Cat that she knows Cat will love because she *cares* about Cat. She shared her *biggest* secret with Cat, only to be met with...rejection.

She's so absorbed in her own misery that it isn't until Cat announces, "Oh, wow, look! Mouthwash," that she even registers that Cat is opening the wrong present.

While Cat shouts about how bad her breath is, Sam realizes what happened. She grabs the present to check. "I mixed up the tags!" She takes the mouthwash from Cat and presents it to Goomer, who is absolutely *delighted*. Well, she thought it had been a weird gift idea when she'd called his mom, but it turns out that his mom, unlike some moms, actually knows what her kid would want.

She gazes at Cat as Goomer fawns over his mouthwash and foot wash. Cat is speechless and looks...strangely guilty.

"Wait, so then what did you get Cat?" Dice asks.

Sam gets up awkwardly to retrieve Cat's present, the one she'd put in the colorful rainbow bag with the multicolored tissue paper because she knew Cat would like it. She mostly avoids

looking at Cat as she opens her gift, but she hears the way Cat gasps as she pulls out the new jump rope. “You got me a Mister Roper?” she asks incredulously.

Sam forces a smile but looks away from Cat quickly again. She knows that there is joy in giving gifts—that’s why she puts effort into it the times she can actually afford to do it—but it’s awfully hard to tap into when it’s clear that Cat has no interest in extending the same effort to her. Especially after the last full moon they’d spent together. When Nona asks what the gift is, Sam just explains dully that it’s a “New jump rope.”

“The coolest jump rope in the world!” Cat interjects, and begins to enumerate the features that make the jump rope so desirable.

“Remember? You said you really wanted one,” Sam tries.

“Yeah,” Cat says softly.

“What did Sam write on that package there?” Dice asks.

“Doesn’t matter,” Sam tries to cover it, because this is the most humiliating aspect of all.

But Cat is too quick. She picks it up and reads aloud, “I hate most people but you I like. Your friend, Sam.”

And, well, there it is. Sam’s feelings, laid bare. She can’t even look at Cat, she can’t bear to see the pity in her eyes as she sees just how much Sam cares about her. Because Cat has made it *very* clear that she doesn’t feel the same way. Sam is a dog, not worth any more than a nasty pillow that Sam can smell was found on the street.

The impact clearly isn’t lost on the spectators in the room, who all let out a collective “Aww,” at Sam’s pathetic display of affection. “So sweet,” Goomer comments.

“Thanks for the jump rope,” Cat says hesitantly.

“Thanks for the crusty pillow,” Sam returns stoically.

But that’s all she can handle. She climbs over the back of the couch to grab her jacket. Dice and Nona question why she’s leaving, pointing out there are still a lot of presents to open.

“Yeah,” Sam replies through her tight throat. “Have fun.” And she’s gone, away from the pain of sitting next to someone on the couch who she honestly thought might mean something to her. One day.

Sam really wasn’t expecting to have her heart stomped on twice within a year, but it seems like that’s how it’s going to be.

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[A postcard reading “Greetings from Springfield, home of Abe Lincoln” with each letter of Springfield containing an image of a famous building in the city. The card also

depicts a Simpsons-esque drawing of Abe Lincoln in a stovepipe hat, from Springfield, IL]

Carly

The road's starting to flatten out again. Thought about going up to check out Chicago, but, eh, I'd rather just move on. I've seen so much corn I'm starting to worry that's the only food left in the world. Oh and I want you to know I didn't learn a single thing about Abe Lincoln while I was here. I did, however, learn that this isn't where The Simpsons takes place.

Sam

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Cat knows she's made a disaster out of all this. She hurt Sam, and it was impossible to justify or explain in the moment, especially considering Sam had actually gotten her something she *wants*, with a message that feels to Cat like an honest expression of vulnerability from Sam.

Cat had planned Yay Day to give Sam an indication that she still feels very strongly about her, and instead, she'd made Sam feel worthless.

It's understandably awkward when Sam leaves. No one is entirely sure how to handle it at first, but eventually Goomer reaches for another one of his presents, pushing gamely on, and they all attempt to maintain the good cheer of the day as they open the rest of the presents, leaving the ones addressed to Sam still under the bush.

Sam still hasn't come back, and honestly, Cat has only been able to think about her. She has barely been able to muster up any appreciation for the other gifts she's received.

"Maybe we should go home," Dice says awkwardly as Cat begins to gather up all the discarded wrapping paper and gift bags.

"That's probably a good idea," Nona agrees.

"I think I should go find Sam," Cat says quietly.

The three others in the room nod, and Goomer asks, "Do you know where she is?"

Cat has no idea, but she's willing to ride her bike all over town until she finds her. Dice informs her. "I have an idea. She told me about this spot down the block from that one convenience store. She likes to sit there to be alone."

Cat hasn't heard Sam mention a spot where she likes to sit. But then, when she's around, Sam doesn't often want to be alone. At least, she hasn't since she told Cat about her secret, and even before then, it isn't like she went off on her own to just...sit on the street. Maybe it's different when Cat is at school.

But after everyone leaves, Cat follows Dice's hunch. It's the convenience store closest to their house, so it's walkable, and Cat hurries that way.

She can see Sam as she comes around the corner, sitting on a little bench in front of a different apartment complex with her legs tucked up under her, sipping on a Blue Dog soda. She doesn't look toward Cat as she approaches, though for some reason, Cat is certain Sam knows she's there.

"Sam?" she asks.

Sam turns to look at her, eyes moving to take her in without actually meeting Cat's. "How'd you know I'd be here?" she asks in lieu of a greeting.

"Dice told me this is your favorite new spot," Cat explains, taking a cautious seat next to her. Sam isn't looking at her again, her gaze seems to be fixed down the street.

"It is," Sam confirms tonelessly.

"Why?" Cat asks.

"Cause right over there there's a crack in the sidewalk." Sam points with her soda bottle. "So all day long, people walk by and trip and fall on their faces." There's a note of grim satisfaction in her voice. Cat watches as an old man carrying flowers demonstrates exactly what Sam is talking about. "See? Funny," Sam says darkly.

"You're not laughing," Cat points out quietly.

"Yeah, I'm not in a real laughy mood," Sam replies with forced nonchalance.

Cat looks down at her hands and decides to name the very thing she knows is hanging between them. "Is it because I gave you a crusty pillow for Yay Day?" she asks.

"Well." Sam turns to look at her. "What do you think?"

Even though Cat knows she's in the wrong here, she can't help but try to defend herself. "When I asked you about Christmas and your birthday, you said all you care about is the food." It's a weak argument, and she knows it. She doesn't even know why she's trying to rationalize her terrible choice. But the truth—her snooping, the reason for Yay Day, *everything*—is too difficult to admit.

"Yeah, well, maybe if I'd ever gotten a good pr—" Sam cuts herself off, face scrunching up. "Just—"

"What?" Cat urges. She hopes she hasn't reset all the progress they've made together, that Sam still trusts her enough to share things with her.

Not that she thinks she really deserves it.

"Tell me," she insists as Sam tries to brush her off.

With heavy reluctance, Sam shifts on the bench to face her and proceeds to tell a somewhat confusing story about receiving a shovel and a bowl of meatballs from her mother for her

birthday when she was a child. With childlike logic, Sam had buried the meatballs, hoping to grow a meatball tree.

As Sam tells the story, Cat can see she's getting more and more emotional, in a way Cat has never seen before. She has the sense that, as ridiculous as this story seems on the surface (Cat is pretty sure she has a story similar to this from her own childhood, but it's one she remembers as amusing, not tragic), there is something very sensitive here for Sam. This is an old wound, one with layers on top of it and beneath it, and Cat is only being told about the part that bled, not everything that caused it, not all the times it was ripped back open.

And when Sam explains that her fabled meatball tree never grew, she actually bursts into tears, something that Cat has certainly never seen from her before, something Cat is positive Sam has assured her *never* happens. Yet here Sam is, sitting next to Cat, crying about a lousy gift from her childhood to the very person who just gave her an even worse gift in adulthood. Cat reaches for her, pulling Sam to her chest, petting her hair, the way she pets her fur, when Sam is a wolf, and now Sam doesn't even try to stop her.

But she also doesn't let it go on for long. When someone else trips over the sidewalk crack, Sam draws away, face tight and twisted to keep from crying more, and fixes her hair, glancing awkwardly at Cat and shifting away on the bench, as if she already regrets letting Cat see her cry.

Cat can't think of anything to say except to genuinely apologize, "I'm sorry I gave you a dirty pillow."

"Well, why did ya?" Sam asks sharply.

Cat begins to explain that she thought Sam had gotten her mouthwash and foot wash, and Sam quickly puts the pieces together, and points out that she opened the filthy pillow before they'd discovered that Sam had tagged her gifts incorrectly. Cat knows she's been caught. She should have just come clean, but she didn't want Sam not to trust her.

After all this, maybe it's too late for that.

Cat tries to deflect by pointing out a little girl on a bicycle just before she hits the sidewalk crack and gets thrown off of her bike, but ultimately, she confesses. "I snooped."

"You snooped!" Sam sounds exasperated.

"I can't help it, Sam, I'm sick, I'm sick! I'm a sick snooping sicko!" It's not really a lie. She doesn't take what she calls *special vitamins* for nothing. But when it comes to gifts and secrets and impulse control...well, even medicated, Cat works with a distinct disadvantage.

Her words hang in the air, her confession out in the open. She hopes it might be enough for them to at least get back on the right path, together. And when a man in a tuxedo trips and lands face first into the wedding cake he's carrying, for the first time, Sam laughs.

Cat laughs, too. And when their laughter dies down, she offers her apology again. "Look, I'm sorry I gave you a dirty pillow, and that your meatball tree never grew."

“Thanks,” Sam replies, and this time, she actually meets Cat’s eye as she speaks.

Cat doesn’t know if she can make any of this up to Sam, but she’s already planning something in her mind. She just needs time to put it together. She stands up from the bench. “Take as long as you need. Just let me know when you’re coming home.”

Sam gazes at her curiously. “I’ll come back when I’m hungry,” she decides, then gazes down the street again. “I could use a few more sidewalk trips right now.”

Cat knows this means she doesn’t have a lot of time. If Sam is sad, her appetite might take a little longer to come back, but those fried pancakes aren’t going to tide her over for long.

Cat hurries home, planning with each step.

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[A postcard featuring a map of Iowa in the foreground flanked by the state bird and the state flower, with a bright red covered bridge in the background. In large letters, the postcard reads Iowa: Hawkeye State]

Okay I’ve traveled through a bunch of open land before but this has mostly been so boring. Maybe because the earlier stuff felt so new and now I’ve just been traveling for so long that a part of me kind of wishes I had a destination, other than just a hot meal and a place to sleep every day. But on the other hand, I’m still enjoying the freedom of being on my own. And I still want to bring you to every state. So, uh, Iowa. Looks just like the last few states.

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Cat is on her way back to the apartment when an additional opportunity arises. She sees Herb, walking along on the next block past their apartment. At least, she’s pretty sure it’s him. “Herb!” she shouts, with all the projection in her voice that she can muster.

He doesn’t turn. Cat starts dashing after him. She’d already hurried home, and she’s a bit winded, but she puts on an extra burst of speed to catch up with him.

“Herb!” she tries again once she’s closer, though it comes out breathy, without as much volume as she’d like.

But he hears her, and turns around. “Oh, hey, Cat,” he smiles at her through his bushy facial hair.

“I need to trade back with you!” Cat says in a rush, “I need that jacket back!”

Herb’s expression turns thoughtful. “You know, I wanted to talk to you about that. I thought about it, and I don’t really have a use for the jacket. But that pillow is one of a kind!”

“So you’ll trade it back?” Cat asks eagerly.

“Of course,” Herb nods. “You still have the pillow, right?”

“At my apartment,” Cat assures him.

“You didn’t do anything to it?”

“It’s just as disgusting as when you gave it to me, I promise,” Cat confirms.

Herb looks satisfied. “Okay, I’ll go to my condo and get the jacket and bring it by your place.”

“Thank you! Happy Yay Day!” And Cat dashes back toward her apartment. She only has so much time.

She starts making meatballs as soon as she gets home. Luckily, the ingredients for meatballs are something she tries to keep on hand, ever since she discovered they’re Sam’s favorite food (she also remembers Sam telling her that *her* meatballs are her favorite that she’s ever had, and can’t help but squeak with joy at the memory).

Though she’s in a hurry, she tries to take her time with this, not wanting to omit any steps, and also because Cat believes in putting emotion in her food. It’s something Nona taught her, and Cat still remembers the time Nona made her lunch when she was a child and explained to her that making a meal with love in her heart makes it taste better. Maybe it was the power of suggestion, but Cat still remembers that ham and cheese sandwich as one of the best ones she’s ever eaten. Because Nona’s adoration for her was a part of the recipe.

And right now, Cat makes sure that everything she feels for Sam gets packed with the herbs and spices into the little balls of ground meat as she forms them. She focuses intently, on her affection for Sam, on the way Sam makes her laugh, makes her feel safe. On the way just seeing her, coming home to her, makes Cat smile. On just how much it means to her that Sam trusts her with her secret (especially when she *knows* just how hard secrets are for Cat).

But most of all, Cat makes her meatballs with love, the love for Sam she’s carried quietly in her heart for months, since only days after they’d met.

Once they’re baking in the oven, Cat hurries to her bedroom and opens her closet, immediately beginning to pull jewelry off of a cute display stand that she likes to use. She carries it up front to the kitchen and washes it, making sure it’s as clean as possible, and then thoroughly dries it.

Herb arrives, knocking at the front window instead of the door. Cat opens the front door and he turns, looking surprised to see her there. “Oh, there you are.”

“Do you have the jacket?” Cat isn’t wasting any time right now.

He holds it up. “Do you have the pillow?” he counters.

Cat nods and picks it up from the living room couch. “Right here.”

He takes it from her and examines it. “Yeah, that looks about the same. Wasn’t there some hair on it?” he wonders.

Cat is ready to tear her own hair out to give to him if it will satisfy him. “You asked for the pillow, not the hair.”

“I suppose that’s true.” Herb still looks a little disappointed, but he holds out the jacket to her anyway.

Cat snatches it up, and holds it up to look it over, really just making sure it’s the same jacket she traded before. It is, a beautiful leather jacket in Sam’s exact size. She smiles at Herb. “Thank you for trading me back.”

Herb nods. “If you find the hair...”

“I’ll hold onto it for you.” Cat suppresses a shudder, hoping she doesn’t have to honor this promise. Hopefully the hair on the pillow ended up in the trash with all the gift wrapping.

“Thanks. Now that I have this back, my life is *really* going great!” Herb crows, then begins to walk off with the nasty pillow under his arm.

Cat takes the jacket and folds it carefully, placing it back in the gift box, and putting the gift box under the Yay Berry Bush.

Before long, her timer goes off, and she takes the meatballs out of the oven. She lets them cool a little bit, before beginning to stick them onto the jewelry display.

Because the jewelry display is shaped like a tree.

And she is going to make Sam her very own meatball tree.

Sure, it isn’t going to grow out of the ground. And sure, maybe it isn’t the prettiest thing in the world, a bunch of hunks of meat speared onto a short metal tree sculpture.

But she hopes it can be enough.

She’s also glad that she’s made meatballs enough times by now that she’s really gotten the consistency perfected to where they don’t just fall apart, they actually stay on the tree.

As if drawn home by the smell of fresh meatballs (and, now that Cat thinks about it, maybe she literally *is*), Sam comes through the front door just as Cat is attempting to place the last meatball she thinks will fit on her little jewelry tree.

“I thought I smelled meat—” Sam stops talking. “What is that?” she asks quietly.

Cat gestures with a flourish. “Happy Yay Day!” she says, hoping that her intention to restart the Yay Day festivities with just them translates to Sam’s mind, too.

“Is that...? Cat, what did you—did you really...?” Sam trails off without completing a full thought, staring at the tiny meatball tree Cat had put together.

“I wanted you to finally have a meatball tree,” Cat says quietly, her voice rising slightly in volume as she begins to enumerate her creation’s shortcomings. “I know it didn’t grow from

a pile of meatballs in the ground, and I know it isn't going to just keep making meatballs forever, but—"

"I love it," Sam interrupts softly. "It's perfect." She's standing on the other side of the kitchen island now, eyes fixed on the little metal tree covered in meatballs.

"It's, uh, it is?" Cat falters. Honestly, she'd almost expected Sam to laugh at this more than adore it, she thought it might break the tension that had come about because of Cat being such a jerk to her. She hadn't expected Sam to be so *reverent* about something that's ultimately so silly.

Sam looks at her, finally, and smiles. Her expression is almost embarrassed, as if she, too, is acknowledging that her reaction is a bit more heartfelt than even she expected. "I've wanted one of these since I was little, and you made me one," is the only explanation she offers.

"Yeah." Cat's voice is quiet again. "Because your favorite part of holidays is the food, so this is a food *and* a present. For Yay Day."

Sam laughs, finally, but it's subdued. "You really do get me," she muses.

"I do," Cat nods. "Or at least, I'd like to."

They're both quiet for a moment at this, at Cat's acknowledgement that there's still a lot for them to learn about each other, but that this doesn't deter her. Finally, Sam says, "I never *ever* thought I would say anything like this about your meatballs, but I almost don't want to eat this."

Cat giggles, "Well, it can't last forever. But if you're not ready, there are still other Yay Day presents under the Yay Berry Bush."

"Oh, yeah. Okay." Sam casts one more long, lingering glance at the meatball tree before she heads over to sit on the couch.

Cat brings her the gifts from Dice, Goomer, and Nona to open, and lets Sam know how Dice felt about his present from her (she'd neglected to get Nona a present, though Cat thinks that this time it's because she genuinely didn't know that Nona was going to be involved on Yay Day and not a jab).

And then, finally, she brings Sam the same gift box she'd brought her that morning, and holds it out to her.

Sam looks up at her, clearly hesitant to take the box.

"That disgusting pillow is gone," Cat tells her directly. "This is a do-over. This is what I really wanted to get you for Yay Day. Why I even—" she stops and physically waves her words away before she reveals she made up an entire holiday just to give Sam a present from the heart, because she wants to see how Sam will react, first.

Sam's eyebrows lift as Cat cuts herself off, but she doesn't push. Instead, she takes the box in careful hands and lifts the lid, parts the tissue paper.

Her mouth drops open and then stretches into a grin. “You really got this for me?” she asks, holding up the leather jacket.

“Yeah,” Cat’s smiling now, too, in reaction to Sam. “Do you like it? Try it on.”

“I love it,” Sam says, for the second time that day, and she sets the box aside to stand up and pull the jacket on over her shoulders.

It fits perfectly, and Cat thinks it looks *amazing* on her. “I wanted to get you something special,” Cat says.

“What were you going to say, before, about why something?” Sam probes, waving her hand in imitation of Cat’s earlier gesture.

Cat looks away, “I...made up Yay Day as an excuse to get you a present,” she confesses.

Sam looks at her sharply. “You made up the holiday because of me?” she asks, sounding surprised.

Cat meets her eye. “Of course I did. We didn’t do Christmas presents this year but I needed you to know...you have to know what you mean to me, Sam.”

It’s Sam’s turn to drop her gaze. “I guess I must mean to you the worth of this leather jacket, huh?”

“I wanted to give you the jacket to represent how you make me feel,” Cat blurts out. This is the part she’d rehearsed in her head, the part she really wants Sam to hear, and Sam lifts her eyes to meet hers, showing that she’s listening. “Beautiful, valuable, and protected—safe,” she amends, finding that even though she’d practiced this part, she’s still finding better ways to express herself. “And I wanted you to have something that might mean a lot to you.” And, also, in her mind, she thinks of this gift as a bigger, *better* version of the leather wallet Carly had sent to Sam. Not that...she’s in a competition with Carly. Carly is Sam’s best friend. Cat wants to be...more than that. But it’s hard not to draw the comparison in her own mind, especially when it had been the last gift she’d seen Sam get that seemed to actually mean something to her.

“You know, I meant what I wrote, before,” Sam is still watching her. “I hate most people, but you I like.” Her mouth twists into a little half-smile. “I really, *really* like you, Cat,” she confesses, in a rush.

Cat reaches for her hand, and Sam lets her take it, though her own hand doesn’t move much. “Can we...do something about it?” Cat asks.

She waits for what feels like an hour as Sam still gazes at her, expression guarded, uncertain, until finally, Sam nods. “I think we *have* to,” she says quietly, and Cat feels the tug on her hand as Sam draws her in close and kisses her.

This time, it’s clear who initiates the kiss, and even if a part of Cat was hoping for this, had been anticipating this, she still feels like nothing in the world could make her ready for what

it might feel like for Sam to pull her in and kiss her with such assurance, such confidence, that Cat's knees go weak. She grabs onto Sam, partly to keep from collapsing, and partly because she wants to draw her closer, wants to feel what it's like to have Sam, as a human, in her arms without telling her that there's a time limit for how long Cat is allowed to touch her.

The initial kiss is shorter than their first kiss a few weeks ago, and Sam draws away to rest her forehead against Cat's. Cat closes her eyes, feels how close they are, and whispers, "So... is your *can't* over?"

Sam lifts her head to look at Cat, puzzled eyes the bright blue of wildflowers, until she figures out what Cat means a moment later and says in a voice that seems to tremble at the edges, "It was over the minute I told you I was a werewolf. I just wasn't sure you'd still..."

Cat lets her fingers brush aside a strand of Sam's wild hair from her cheekbone. "I still want to." *I still want* you.

"I figured as much." Sam takes a deep breath. "When you gave me that pillow, I thought you—that's another reason why it hurt so much."

Cat recognizes Sam's very real vulnerability, the kind she doesn't reveal very often. "When I snooped, and saw mouthwash and footwash, I thought that you didn't want me because I smelled too bad. That that was why you couldn't be with me. It was awful."

Sam chuckles, briefly. "No, you smell *incredible*, actually." She bites her lip, as if she wonders whether she should have revealed this.

"I do?"

Sam nods, but apparently she's finished with words, because she's kissing Cat again. Cat sighs against her mouth, and it comes out like a whimper, soft and needy, and she holds onto Sam, clings to her, because despite everything they've just said, there's a part of her that's still scared that Sam might back away, tell her she *can't* again, that like every other time Cat has fallen for someone, it won't be what she expects.

But, well...Sam is already not what she expected. She's a werewolf, and she still likes Cat, wants to be with her. And she thinks Cat *smells good*. Cat shivers at the implications, at how good it feels, to know she appeals to Sam's keen senses.

It's a long time before they stop kissing, and when they do, they've ended up on the couch together, to be off their feet. Sam is gazing at her, eyes soft, cheeks pink, still wearing her new jacket. "I think I might be hungry enough for my meatball tree," is the first thing she says.

Cat grins and brings it over to the coffee table, along with a napkin. Sam reaches out and slowly, carefully, pulls the first meatball off of the tree and pops in her mouth with a groan of satisfaction.

"So, are we...together?" Cat asks.

Sam narrows her eyes as she chews. “That’s what you want, isn’t it?”

“Of course,” Cat assures.

“Then, yeah.” Sam wipes her hands on the napkin and turns a little more toward Cat on the couch. “Look, this,” she gestures between them. “This isn’t really easy for me. It’s not like I’ve done this much.”

“Me neither,” Cat interjects, because she’s never had a relationship that lasted even a month.

Sam nods, taking that in, and says haltingly, “I’m going to try my best, because I...the feelings I get around you...” Sam shakes her head. “I just want you to know I’m going to try,” she finishes.

Cat knows this isn’t exactly something most people want to hear with a burgeoning relationship. But she also knows how open Sam is being, and just how much a promise like that is worth from someone like Sam Puckett.

It’s all Cat can do to swallow down the words she wants to say in response, the words that she knows, rationally, it’s *absolutely* too early to reveal to Sam, how scared she would be to hear them right now. “I’m going to try, too. Because of how I feel,” is what she settles on. But there’s one detail she wants to be clear on. “Can I call you my girlfriend?”

Sam laughs around a mouthful of meatball. “Girlfriend,” she says, as if trying out the word. “Yeah, that sounds about right. Only my *girlfriend* would think to make me a meatball tree.”

Cat grins so hard her face hurts. It’s difficult to steal kisses between meatballs as Sam eats the entire tree, but they certainly do their best.

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[A postcard featuring the text Greetings from Springfield, the Birthplace of Route 66, over two images, one of skyline with more trees than tall buildings, the other of a map of the United States showing the range of Route 66, from Springfield, MO]

Okay, I don’t even really get this because how can this be the “birthplace” of the road if it starts and ends somewhere else entirely? Also, what is even so special about this road? I guess I could’ve gone and checked out some of it, but I didn’t. Maybe I’ll run into it when I go west. Anyway, I guess I can check another Springfield off my list. I don’t think this one has anything to do with the Simpsons, either.

-

Sam can’t believe how *different* everything feels, after she’s been gifted a meatball tree and a leather jacket and she’s acquired a girlfriend.

It’s not as though it’s exactly a *surprise*, to either of them, that they have feelings for each other. That much had been quite clear a few weeks ago, the first time they’d kissed. But having everything out in the open makes the very *air* between them feel different, like the entire apartment is infused with possibility. Everything feels *new*.

But then, even as Sam marvels at this potent feeling, she knows that she shouldn't be surprised by it, either. She knows the power words can have, the power that the reveal of something hidden can hold. The power of truth, and the way it can change *everything*.

And yet, as much as everything feels so palpably different, a lot is still the same. She and Cat have been living together for months now, and they have their routines, their comfort with each other. They still spend much of the afternoon and evening watching TV, and the biggest difference is kissing through the commercial breaks (and sometimes during the show, if it's less interesting than each other's lips). Cat still makes dinner, but Sam is compelled to help her, because even with as much time as they've spent together since they've met, Sam still wants more, and having Cat across the apartment in the kitchen feels like too far.

Sam thinks about how she used to insist she didn't want Cat to hug her, how she'd laughed at Cat, a few times, instead of laughing *with* her, and wonders how she could have been so foolish. Because as much as she'd tried to deny it for so long, her feelings for Cat have been strong for a long time. She just hadn't allowed herself to entertain them, because she hadn't thought it possible to tell Cat what she is. And more than that, she hadn't thought that she could know how to love again, and though the word is so strong that it frightens her a little, to even think it idly, she's beginning to realize that she *does* know how, or at least, *will* know how. That's a less overwhelming prospect. That Cat will bring that out of her, in the future, is certain.

The routine of their day extends to bedtime, when the biggest change is that Sam comes to bed at the same time as Cat, and they kiss goodnight. But then Cat turns and retreats to her own bed, as if it hasn't even occurred to her that they might share one. And maybe it hasn't. Both of their beds are small, and though they're both small people, that still doesn't make a twin bed exactly ideal for sharing. Sam stands for a moment at the junction of the two sides of their bedroom, feet firmly on the cool concrete of her side, staring at the warm, pink cocoon of Cat's side of the room, warring with her desire to cross the threshold and keep moving until she is tucked up against Cat in her bed, but ultimately, Sam turns and hops up into her own bed.

Sam lies there for a while, staring at the ceiling, listening to the sounds of Cat shifting and breathing until she falls asleep, feeling ridiculous for how much she dislikes being so far away from Cat when they've been sleeping apart this whole time.

She remembers, then, the powerful urge to join Cat in her bed, when she'd been a wolf, and she wonders what her instincts might have told her if she'd been a wolf around Cat earlier, when she wouldn't have had her human mind to rationalize or ignore them, the way she'd done for so long.

Sam wakes up after Cat, as she usually does, and comes out to find Cat making breakfast. Sam wonders how many kisses they can fit into a day at home together as Cat greets her with a good morning kiss and a cup of coffee.

But in the late afternoon, after breakfast, both her PearPhone and Cat's light up with a text. Sam picks hers up.

It's Jade.

Want to hang out with me and Tori today?

Sam glances over at Cat. "Did Jade just text you?"

"Yeah," Cat confirms.

Sam's brow furrows, "Does she...know?"

"Know what?" Cat asks, before she seems to realize what Sam is asking. "I didn't tell her anything yet, no."

"Wonder why she asked us on a double date," Sam muses.

Cat giggles. "She probably wants to hang out with you, but knows you guys can't do *you* things with Tori around, and she doesn't want me to feel left out."

"I guess I do want to meet Tori," Sam says. "I've heard a lot about her from Jade."

"You've met Tori, haven't you?" Cat asks. Sam's expression is blank, and Cat elaborates, "She was on your show one time. She and Carly dated the same two-timing jerk."

Sam's eyes widen. "Wait, holy shit, Jade is dating *that* Tori?" she asks.

"Yeah. You didn't know we went to the same party back then?" Cat asks.

"I had no idea," Sam shakes her head. "Probably would have put it together when I saw Tori today, but...wow, yeah. That was a while ago. And that party was so crowded." She wonders what might have happened if she'd noticed Cat there, back then. But then, all her senses were primed to find Steven so she could prove to Carly that he was trash and exact revenge, and she wasn't paying attention to much else besides food.

"I remember watching you beat Robbie in a freestyle competition," Cat says shyly.

And only then does Sam remember why Robbie had seemed familiar when she'd invited him over to make Cat jealous. Her mouth drops open.

Okay. Maybe she *wouldn't* have put anything together by meeting Tori. But to be fair, Robbie had felt pretty insignificant behind Rex, who he hadn't brought with him when he'd come over a few weeks ago. Which...Sam realizes that being overlooked in Rex's presence is probably *exactly* Robbie's intention. *Huh*. Maybe the nerdy guy has more talent than she'd given him credit for.

"It just seems like so long ago." Sam shakes her head. So much has changed since all of that had happened.

Cat smiles and pulls Sam in for a kiss. “It was a long time ago,” she agrees. “It’ll be cool for you and Tori to meet again! And this time she’ll have a girlfriend who is only dating her and not cheating.”

Sam chuckles, “Yeah, okay. Let’s hang out with Jade and Tori.” Honestly, though she likes hanging out with Jade and she’s interested to meet Tori again under better circumstances, she’s a *little* disappointed that she and Cat aren’t going to be spending the whole day at home where they can kiss as much as they want to.

Jade texts back that she and Tori will meet them down at the boardwalk, which Sam likes, because it’s close to their apartment. She and Cat take their time getting ready for the day, which involves a lot of kissing, until it’s time to leave to meet up with their friends (or, well, Cat’s friends; Sam doesn’t know whether she can call Tori one yet).

As they’re getting ready to leave, Sam asks, “Do you want to tell them about us?”

“Yeah, I think so. It’s not too soon, is it?”

Sam shakes her head, “I don’t think so. I just didn’t know how you wanted to let them know.”

“I don’t know,” Cat shrugs. “However makes sense in the moment.”

Sam nods. She decides she’ll leave the reveal to Cat, since she’s known them both longer.

They ride the short distance to the boardwalk on Sam’s motorcycle, and after they park, Cat texts Jade and they figure out which way to walk to meet each other. And within moments, they’re face to face with Tori and Jade.

Sam has just enough time to remember Tori—and to remember just how much she looks like Shelby Marx—before Cat is engulfing her in a hug, squealing, “Hi, Tori!” Sam and Jade, meanwhile, don’t hug, but they do jab at each other’s shoulders with their fists in greeting.

“Hey,” Jade greets casually, the slightest smile on her face.

“Hey,” Sam nods back, giving her own mild grin in return.

And as Cat and Tori separate, Jade gestures toward her, “Sam, this is my girlfriend, Tor—”

For a moment, Sam doesn’t understand what is happening, as her body seems to be moving without her direction. She knows that Tori is moving, too. Her eyes lock with Tori’s and she realizes, abruptly, that they’re circling each other, and from the expression on Tori’s face, she has no idea what’s prompting this either.

“Uh, guys?” Jade asks uncertainly. Sam isn’t looking directly at Jade or Cat, because her attention is entirely on Tori, but she’s aware that they both have stepped back, away from the two women who are circling each other, moving faster and faster.

Cat giggles, a nervous sound. “I’ve never seen two people meet like this.”

Sam is so focused on Tori's face that she sees the moment of dawning comprehension as it happens, the same moment that she, too, realizes what is happening. "Are you—" Tori begins.

"—A werewolf?" Sam finishes.

Sam hears Cat ask Jade, "You have a werewolf girlfriend, too?"

"Holy shit—wait, Sam's your *girlfriend*?" Jade replies.

"Guess we have a lot to talk about," Sam says, eyes still locked with Tori's.

"Yeah," Tori agrees, then grunts, "If we can ever—stop—doing this."

Worm

[A postcard featuring digital art of a waterfall next to a rocky cliff overlooking a vast landscape of forest and distant mountains. Silhouettes of people can be seen at the top of the rocky cliff. The top of the postcard reads “Lookout Mountain” and the bottom reads Chattanooga, Tennessee]

Carly– Okay, I saw just enough about Rock City to be curious. I am doing this to see the country after all, so I saw Rock City. It cost more than I wanted to spend, but I got in. And you know, as much as I hated walking all day, it was actually pretty cool. There was all sorts of weird stuff to see. I think you would’ve liked the Stone Witch. It would be a hell of a place to spend a full moon. –Sam

-

Sam and Tori finally stop circling each other after they grab onto each other and then let go, and it seems to break the spell. Or...whatever instinctive impulse propelled them into such a weird confrontation. Sam has never experienced anything like it.

It’s jarring enough that they all agree to head back to Sam and Cat’s apartment for some privacy so that they can discuss all of the fascinating implications of the fact that there are *two* werewolves in the friend group now. Two werewolves both dating human women.

It’s cool, Sam thinks, but also, maybe because of the shock of it, it’s unsettling.

Additionally unsettling is inviting Tori into her home. She’s never really experienced feeling territorial before, but then, circumstances in which she’s encountered other werewolves have been much different in the past. This is the first time she’s inviting a brand-new werewolf who she doesn’t know very well into her home. Not to mention, it’s the first time in her life that she’s really had a space that *feels* like her home.

Tori seems to sense Sam’s (metaphorically) raised hackles, and is clearly a little apprehensive as she follows Jade into Sam and Cat’s apartment. She looks around with interest. “Your apartment is really cool!” She offers the compliment, the way polite people do, but it feels utterly genuine coming from her.

“Thanks!” Cat replies cheerfully. “Sam made it really special.”

Having Cat attribute the decor to her makes Sam feel all the more ownership of the space, and she takes a deep breath so as not to be rude to Tori, who is technically an invited guest. Well, invited by Cat, anyway. Maybe that’s part of the problem.

“There’s something familiar about all of this...” Tori trails off, gesturing around her.

“Oh, yeah, Sam decorated our apartment with the furniture she took from the set of *That’s a Drag* after it got canceled,” Cat reports happily, “Because it was our favorite show.”

Tori's mouth drops open. "Oh, my god. That's it! That's...*wow*."

"Wait," Jade cocks her head to the side, "You really stole the furniture from the set?" she asks.

"Sure did," Sam replies easily. "Better than it sitting in a storage warehouse for eternity."

"That's fair. Huh," Jade seems to take that in. "I never noticed, but I didn't watch the show that much."

"This is incredible," Tori gushes, "Just...*wow*." She flashes Sam a smile. "That's really cool."

Something about her enthusiasm makes Sam relax slightly. "Well, uh. Welcome to our apartment, then." And somehow, formalizing it helps, too. She feels a little better about Tori's presence there.

Tori looks more relaxed, too. Cat starts brewing coffee and offering sodas and snacks, and Sam suddenly doesn't like the idea of their food being shared. She has to remind herself that Cat offering food is an important part of being a good hostess to her. She mentally shakes herself off. Sure, she's always been particular about maintaining access to a food source, about knowing where her next meal is coming from. She's never gotten the same pleasure that Cat gets out of sharing food, probably because she's never purposefully shared any. But she's also never felt so strongly about Cat offering food to guests.

Getting used to another werewolf is harder than Sam thought it would be.

It's Cat who really kicks off the discussion. "So, Tori," she says conversationally as she places a bowl of chips and some dip on the coffee table. "How long have you been a werewolf?"

"Since...always," Tori replies, then casts a curious glance at Sam. "You...too, right?" she asks uncertainly.

"Yeah. Born one. I've never heard of anyone who wasn't," Sam replies.

"Me neither, but when Cat asked..." Tori shrugs.

"I never had any idea," Cat addresses Tori.

"You never had any idea about me, either, and you live with me," Sam points out.

"I dunno," Jade drawls. "Once Tori told me, some things started to make sense. Like how she's freakishly strong."

"Sam, too," Cat nods.

"And how she seems to know things she shouldn't sometimes, because she like, hears and smells things that we can't."

Cat gazes at Sam pensively, "Sam knows a lot of things," she agrees.

"And how much dogs like her."

Cat nods thoughtfully. "Dice's dog liked you," she reminds Sam.

"Yeah, so did his more vicious counterpart, too," Sam agrees. Sam has never had any issues with dogs. She'd even run into them a few times in her wolf form and they'd basically treated her like one of them, though she hadn't spent long getting to know them, because where there were dogs, there were generally people. She'd been more surprised when Dice's goat, Murf, had been so unafraid of her. But then, she's not really sure what typical goat behavior looks like.

"When did Tori tell you?" Cat asks Jade.

Jade shrugs. "A while ago. Before we started dating."

"Us, too!" Cat claps. "Sam told me first."

"Well, you basically didn't give me a choice," Sam snarks, but she smiles affectionately to take the sting out of her words.

"Jade cornered me a little bit, too," Tori reveals. "But also, I kind of wanted to tell someone who I didn't think would be freaked out by it. And I was right. Jade was *fascinated*."

"So was I," Cat nods. "I didn't think you guys were real. Because you never told me anything, Tori."

"Yeah, well," Tori runs a hand through her hair awkwardly. "We are supposed to keep it secret."

"Also," Jade puts in bluntly, "she probably didn't think you could keep it to yourself."

Cat frowns. "I can keep a secret. I kept you from knowing Sam lived with me, didn't I?"

"Okay, but you also announced that you had a 'werewolf girlfriend' down at the boardwalk," Jade air quotes as she speaks.

"Sam said it first!" Cat defends herself.

"Wait, you were keeping me a secret from your friends?" Sam asks.

"Only because I didn't want you and Jade to kill each other," Cat says contritely.

"Still don't get why she thought that would happen," Sam shakes her head at Jade, who offers a smile that looks more sadistic than gleeful.

"Okay, but," Tori sounds unnerved, "I've never experienced anything like what happened today at the boardwalk."

“Me neither,” Sam agrees. “I don’t know what that was.”

Tori’s brow furrows as she watches Sam. “It can’t be just what happens when werewolves encounter each other out in the world. We’d be much worse at staying hidden if that were the case. Besides, it’s not like you’re the only other werewolf I’ve ever met.”

Sam chuckles, “Yeah, of course not. And also, it’s not even the first time we’ve met.”

“Right,” Tori nods. Unlike Sam, she doesn’t need a reminder that they’ve met before. But she’d also known exactly who Sam and Carly were when she’d run into them at Kenan Thompson’s house. Huh. Sam remembers that she’d been a *fan*.

“Wonder why it didn’t happen back then,” Sam muses.

Tori shakes her head. “I don’t know. It’s definitely odd. Maybe I can ask my parents about it.”

“Okay,” Jade interrupts. “Your weird werewolf peeing contest in the middle of the Venice Beach boardwalk was interesting and everything, but can we talk about the fact that Cat said Sam’s her *girlfriend*?”

“Yeah?” Sam tries to sound nonchalant, but she knows she’s smiling. Cat shoots her a cute, dimpled smirk of her own.

“She is,” Cat confirms.

“Okay,” Jade says slowly. “Not that it’s really that much of a surprise, but...since *when*?”

“Since yesterday,” Cat replies happily.

“Oh. Huh,” Jade replies thoughtfully. “Guess I can save the ‘how could you not tell me’ lecture.”

“You and Tori didn’t tell us anything for weeks,” Cat accuses.

“We were getting used to what it might mean,” Jade defends.

Sam glances over at Tori as Jade and Cat continue their playful argument over how long it’s appropriate to keep a relationship private. Tori meets her eye with a shy smile. “It’s so cool to have another werewolf around,” she gushes.

“Yeah?” Sam asks, because she’s not sure she agrees. She’s still getting used to it. She’s been living as a lone wolf for long enough that she’s comfortable with it, and Tori’s presence in her life—not to mention, in her *home*, complicates this.

“Definitely,” Tori agrees. “I mean, my family’s okay, I guess. Except my sister,” she grimaces. “But, as much as I love them, it’s not the same as, like, someone my age who gets what it’s like. *Especially* since you’re also dating a human.”

Sam wants to feel this same camaraderie with Tori, but she finds herself *bristling* when Tori mentions her family. Her family, who are “*okay*,” and her parents, who are available and involved enough that Tori is considering asking them about what happened when she met Sam. Sam...can’t imagine what it would be like to have a family who she could dispassionately describe as “*okay*” or who in the same breath she could casually express that she loves them. Her family is *not* okay, and never has been, and probably never will be. Nor can she imagine approaching any member of her family with a question about being a werewolf. Not a single one of them had ever stepped up to help her with any aspect of that. Tori’s family sounds...*normal*. And that kind of normalcy is as alien to Sam as truly being human.

It’s not really envy that she experiences when she hears Tori describe her family. It’s more like...distaste, at the idea that Tori thinks they have anything in common.

But they do, and Sam knows that, so she tries to set aside the notion of what she’s assumed about Tori’s family (because, really, she doesn’t know anything yet, and she tries to remind herself of that). “Yeah. It’s weird to realize they don’t sense the stuff we do.”

“*Completely*,” Tori agrees emphatically.

“Like, what would it be like to not be able to *smell* things?” Sam asks, both incredulous and a little amused. If the conversation stays in this vein, she feels like she and Tori could actually connect.

“God, I can’t imagine,” Tori shakes her head. “I kind of feel bad for them sometimes.”

“Our noses might be pathetic, but we can hear you just fine,” Jade drawls.

“I think it’s sweet that they’re talking about wolf stuff together,” Cat says mildly.

“Well then let’s talk about what’s weird about dating *them*,” Jade addresses Cat. “Though, I know it’s pretty new for you two.”

“We’ve spent a full moon together with Sam changing each night. Plus I’ve lived with her for a while now,” Cat assures Jade. “I know *some* things.”

“And you still have more to learn, I’m sure.” Jade’s eyes glint with mischief and she casts a smirk at Tori, who Sam swears blushes slightly. But then she turns her attention back to Cat. “So what was it like for you when Sam changed for the first time?”

Sam is interested to hear what Cat might say, and she has Tori’s attention, too, so they abandon their own conversation to listen to their girlfriends talk. Cat grins widely. “It was really *fun*. It’s kind of like having a dog but one that *really* understands you.”

Tori gives Sam a conspiratorial frown at this, and Jade laughs. “Oh, yes, completely. Sometimes I throw a stick for Tori.”

“*Jade*,” Tori groans, covering her face in embarrassment.

“That’s so cute!” Cat says excitedly. “I want to get Sam some dog toys but she doesn’t like the idea. But I think she could at least use a dog bowl so it doesn’t get pushed all over the floor when she has dinner.”

Jade cocks her head to the side. “You know, Tori doesn’t really eat as a wolf,” she says thoughtfully.

Cat shrugs. “Sam’s always eating anyway.”

“I get hungrier as a wolf,” Sam explains. She turns to Tori curiously, “I know some wolves never get a taste for hunting, but you don’t eat at all?” she asks incredulously.

Tori shrugs, a gesture that seems defensive. “It’s not that I *don’t* eat, I just don’t eat a lot. I have to be careful. I had too many times that I ate a lot as a wolf and it didn’t sit well when I turned back.” She grimaces.

“I’ve never had that experience, even when I’ve hunted,” Sam muses.

“You—wait, you *hunt*?” Tori is clearly shocked, but Sam can also hear the undercurrent of disgust in her voice, too.

“Yeah,” Sam tries to play it off nonchalantly, but she can feel the way her face is compressing into a scowl. “Sometimes, it was the only way I was sure I’d get enough to eat,” she says defensively.

“Oh.” Tori seems to subside at that, her expression flickering into something closer to pity as she regards Sam curiously. “It’s just that my family never did, so…” she trails off. She’s clearly trying to walk back her judgmental reaction, but poorly. Sam can *smell* that she’s unsettled by Sam’s revelation.

So Sam jabs right back. “I’ve heard of wolves whose stomachs turned on what they ate when they were changed, but I always assumed it was in their heads. It’s not like when we’re in human form that we’re actually *human*,” she points out. And it is true that she’s always believed this. Werewolves live so much of their lives immersed in human society and culture, it’s no wonder that the idea of eating raw, living animals could be difficult for some, once the wolfish instincts fade. But werewolves are built to hunt. And Sam has never been interested in denying herself that pleasure or that sustenance.

Tori flushes slightly. “All I can say is I know what’s good for my body,” she mumbles.

An awkward silence stretches. Sam avoids everyone’s eyes but glances to see that Jade appears concerned about Tori, but nothing that Sam can sense tells her that Jade is judging her. In fact, Jade seems *intrigued*.

She’s almost too afraid to find out how Cat is reacting, but when she glances at her, Cat meets her eyes without hesitation, smiling with compassion.

Jade steers them into safer waters. “Okay, so, how did it happen between you two?” she gestures between Sam and Cat. “Because like I said, it’s not a surprise, given everything I

saw that weekend with the motorcycle stunt that wasn't."

"I still wish you'd have brought me with you for that," Tori frowns. But then she seems to realize how that sounds and changes tactics, offering her own encouragement, "Not because I wanted to see it go wrong, I just thought it sounded cool. But yes, please, tell us how you two happened!"

Cat shoots a smile at Sam, but her dark eyes seem to be asking permission, perhaps wondering how much detail she's allowed to share. Sam lifts a shoulder in a shrug. It's new, this idea of really being open about a relationship, but a lot is new with Cat, and Sam wants to embrace it as well as she can. "Well," Cat begins, "Whatever you think you saw back when you met Sam is probably right, because after we got home from visiting Robbie and Freddie in the hospital, that's when we kissed for the first time."

Jade looks *very* satisfied. "I had a feeling something like that was brewing between you two. Actually, I thought it was already happening at first."

"She did," Tori nods. "The first time she met Sam, she was already telling me that she was pretty sure you two were dating."

"Well, we kissed then," Cat says. "But I know I liked Sam for a lot longer." She flashes that smile at her, the one that Sam can't help but return, whenever it appears. Sam doesn't trust herself to speak, so she just nods in agreement. "But Sam wasn't ready," she concludes.

"Because you didn't know I was a werewolf yet," she explains, her voice quieter than she expects. "I didn't think I could get that close to you if you didn't know."

"So during the next full moon, she told me. Or, really, she told me *and* showed me," Cat said. "And then yesterday..." It's Cat's turn to find herself a little tongue-tied, certainly remembering the disaster that had almost occurred when she was just trying to do something nice for Sam. "Yesterday is when we finally talked about it," is what she settles on.

"That's so sweet!" Tori's smile is bright.

"Yeah," Jade drawls, almost sarcastic, but Sam can tell she's just putting up a front. "Real adorable."

They chat for a little bit longer that afternoon, and Sam doesn't think she and Tori directly address each other once for the rest of the visit. It's awkward, and maybe that's why when Tori and Jade leave, it feels kind of sudden. But Sam relaxes once they're gone, and feels guilty that one of Cat's best friends, and Jade's *girlfriend*, is someone who she...just doesn't like very much. And it *sucks*, especially because she's the only other werewolf Sam has spoken to in months.

"Well that...went well," Cat says with forced enthusiasm once it's just them in the apartment again. Sam shoots her an incredulous look, and Cat's shoulders slump. "Okay, I guess it could have gone better."

"You think?" Sam snorts.

Cat comes to sit next to Sam, her expression earnest, and Sam worries she's going to start telling Sam all the great things about Tori and why she's one of Cat's best friends and Sam doesn't want to hear it. She already knows about Tori's kindness and encouragement, her goofy humor, her loyalty as a friend, the way she takes responsibility for her mistakes—the things that make Cat appreciate her and Jade love her. She can't help how she feels.

But instead, Cat asks an interesting question.

"Is Tori the first other werewolf you've met who was our age?" she asks.

Sam takes a deep breath. She's been wondering when this would come up. There's still so much she doesn't want to say, so much she isn't ready to revisit, but she can at least offer Cat this much truth. "No," she says quietly. "Carly was a werewolf, too."

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[A postcard depicting a graphic arts representation of the entrance to the Omni Grove Park Inn. An old-fashioned car is parked out front and two individuals and their luggage stand nearby. Text on the postcard reads Asheville, North Carolina]

This place is like a weird blend of an arts community and also some fancy wealth, but I guess that's anywhere, when you think about it. It's hard to describe how everywhere starts to feel the same after a while but also then you notice something that stands out and really makes each place special. Each place has its own feeling. You know what I mean? I wonder what Italy feels like, with you in it.

Sam

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Sam vividly remembers the moment everything changed as she relays the condensed version of events to Cat.

A few full moons had passed since Sam first started changing. Her mom had come home, eventually, and Sam learned that she had traveled to visit Melanie in anticipation of Melanie's first transformation. She had explained that she didn't think Sam would need her help like Melanie did. Still, as Sam had shouted at her before storming out of the house to go stay at Carly's, she could have at least warned her.

So far, she'd managed to avoid her mother on full moon nights. No way in hell was she going to spend any time with her mom when they were both transformed if she could avoid it. Instead, she went to Carly's house, where Carly would either hide Sam in her room or up in the little extra room on the third floor of the apartment that didn't really get used for much beyond sculpture storage.

Luckily, Spencer was pretty hands-off as far as raising Carly went, so as long as they weren't being too loud, he didn't really have any reason to check on them. Which seemed like it would

be easy, but Sam noticed that the by the third night of the full moon (she'd been freaked out for the first couple of months, and kept worrying she would somehow start changing every night, but the pattern had established itself, and she and Carly now knew to expect three nights of Sam changing), she had more energy than she knew what to do with.

Staying quiet when she was amped up and enclosed in Carly's apartment was harder than they both anticipated.

On the first night of the fourth full moon since Sam started changing, Carly brought food upstairs to her; Sam was waiting for her in her bedroom, and noticed right away that Carly's eyes were panicked. "I think Spencer is getting suspicious," she hissed.

Sam stood up quickly on stiff legs, her instincts telling her to bolt, but where? And how? She couldn't exactly jump out of Carly's window when they were nine floors up.

Carly reached out and stroked the fur on Sam's head, soothing her. "Don't worry," she murmured, "I'll protect you. If nothing else, if he comes up here, you can hide under my bed or in my closet and I'll just tell him you went home." She offered Sam a dish of macaroni and cheese that she'd brought up from the dinner table.

Sam felt her tail wag as she began to scarf down the food. It was delicious, though she could tell her body wanted something more...meaty. Well, that was often true even when she wasn't a wolf.

But three months of being cooped up inside as a wolf had consequences that neither of them could predict. Because the evening quickly turned to wrestling and chasing, like it so often did, but Sam could feel herself getting so excited. And with that excitement, she began to lose control.

"Sam!" Carly laughed as Sam literally bounded off the wall, landing with a thud and a scrape of claws on the floor, "Be careful!"

But Sam's response was only to yip playfully and leap over to tap at Carly, as if playing tag with her, before shooting across the room.

"Sam!" Carly's voice was more urgent now. "We have to keep it down, Spencer will hear us!"

Deep in the back of her mind, Sam knew this was important. She knew Carly was right. She knew all of this...but she couldn't control herself. She was full of energy, and like a soda bottle that had been shaken and then opened, her energy had nowhere to go but out.

As Carly moved toward her, maybe to chase her, but more likely to try to calm and shush her, Sam leaped past her, landing on Carly's little pleather loveseat, and launching herself off the back of it.

It was lighter than she expected.

The loveseat tumbled over backwards onto the floor with a very solid thud.

Sam froze.

Carly froze.

Sam heard footsteps on the stairs and when she glanced at Carly, it was clear she heard them, too.

“Hide!” Carly hissed, shoving Sam toward her closet.

Sam felt her heart pounding and her nails scrabbling on the floor as she managed to skitter into Carly’s closet as Carly pushed the door shut. On her tail. Sam stifled a yelp, at least grateful that Carly had merely shoved the door once and hadn’t pushed it closed forcefully with her whole body. But she’d clearly been trying to get to the loveseat before Spencer walked in, and now the closet door was ajar, and Carly was halfway across the room, and her bedroom door was opening.

“Are you okay? What was that?” Spencer asked as he burst in.

“Nothing!” Carly replied, too quickly, too loudly, too manically. She giggled, a purely nervous sound. “Just knocked over my little sofa here, it’s no big deal.”

“Oh.” Spencer seemed to relax a little. Like his sister, he tended to have big reactions to things. Sam had seen plenty of times when he’d overreacted to relatively normal things because he was worried about Carly’s safety. Maybe that was part of why Carly was a little neurotic, herself. Sam kind of liked that about her, though. She liked a lot about Carly.

“Yeah, don’t worry so much, nothing’s wrong.” Carly was rambling a little, clearly trying to prompt Spencer to leave them alone.

“Yeah, okay,” Spencer replied, and was about to turn to leave when he frowned. “Where’s Sam?” he asked.

“Sam?” Carly asked, her voice pitched higher than normal. “Oh, Sam went home a while ago.”

“I thought you said she was spending the night.”

“I thought so, too, but she had to go home.”

Spencer looked deeply skeptical. “I didn’t see her leave.”

“Maybe you were in the bathroom.”

Spencer’s eyes were flicking all over the room. For a moment, Sam could have sworn they met hers, from where she was hiding inside Carly’s closet. “Sam is still here,” he said decisively.

“She’s not!” Carly insisted.

Spencer just cast her an impatient look. "Sam, come out, wherever you are. Or I will find you." He took a step toward the closet, eyes locked on it.

She could see Carly's shoulders slump in defeat, could see her turn toward the closet with wild eyes. Out of options. Could they trust Spencer? Seemed like they had to. Sam took a deep breath and nosed the door open further and stepped out of Carly's closet.

Spencer stopped moving toward the closet. "Oh," he said, staring at Sam, then began to nod slowly. "Okay. Yeah. This makes sense now."

Sam sat down on her haunches, shocked at his reaction. Spencer looked between Carly and Sam, then ran a hand through his hair. "Spencer—" Carly started.

He held up his hands. "Hey, look, don't worry, you're not in trouble. But tomorrow we're going to have a conversation. We have a lot to talk about, and Sam, I'm going to need you to be able to talk, too." Spencer headed toward the door. "Try not to be too loud up here," were his parting words.

Slowly, Carly sank down onto the loveseat as she watched Spencer leave, then she turned to look at Sam. "He...what? What was that?" she asked.

Sam could only shake her head, in that awkward, deliberate motion she could manage as a wolf. She stepped over to Carly and rested her head on Carly's knee, offering comfort, while Carly stroked the fur on her head.

Most of Sam's energy had drained out of her with Spencer's interruption, which was probably for the best. She and Carly were up late that night, with Carly speculating about what Spencer would want to talk to them about. Sam wished she could contribute to the conversation other than light barks or growls to signal whether she agreed with Carly or not. By the time they went to bed, with Sam curled up on Carly's loveseat and Carly tucking a blanket around her, Carly had decided that the most likely explanation was that Spencer's best friend Socko must be a werewolf, too. That would explain why he wasn't surprised about Sam, and it made sense to Carly, in a weird sort of way, that she and her brother might attract similar types of friends. Sam wasn't sure she agreed, but she also wasn't sure what to think.

In the morning, Sam woke up nude beneath the blanket on Carly's loveseat and quietly redressed in the dim dawn light before settling back down to try to sleep a little more. But it was hard, when she couldn't stop thinking about how Spencer had caught her last night, how he wanted to talk to them both today.

When they came downstairs for breakfast, Spencer was waiting for them.

"Hey," he waved, "I made bacon and eggs."

"Wow," Carly commented, "and you didn't burn them?"

"Thank god," Sam groaned. "I'm so hungry."

"I bet," Spencer said mildly. "Sit down." He gestured to the little dining table.

"So," Carly drawled slowly when they were all seated with a plate of food in front of them. "What did you want to talk to us about today?"

"Well," Spencer started, "I wanted to start with Sam. Sam, how long have you been changing?" he asked.

Sam raised her eyebrows. "I'm guessing you mean..." she said slowly, still strangely uncertain whether she could just come out and say it to Spencer. Maybe he had decided last night was all a hallucination.

Spencer fixed her with an incredulous look. "I'm talking about you being a werewolf," he prompted impatiently.

"Right." Sam nodded as if the reminder was actually helpful. "Um, this is the fourth month I've changed."

He blinked. "Have you been hiding up in Carly's room every month?"

"Pretty much."

"Huh." He considered that. "It hadn't really occurred to me until yesterday that I thought you'd been around each night. So then, who taught you about being a werewolf?"

"Uh, no one," Sam said bitterly. "My mom skipped town to go help Melanie. Carls and I didn't know what was happening until I was just changing."

"I thought as much," Spencer nodded. "Well, if you have any questions, you can come to me, okay?"

"Okay, but, why do you know so much about this?" Sam asked skeptically.

Spencer hesitated, glancing over at Carly, then said, "Because I'm a werewolf, too."

While Sam stared and tried to process this, Carly burst out laughing. "Oh, you are not," she scoffed. "You were regular old human Spencer last night!"

"Right," he nodded, "because I took wolfsbane." He looked over at Sam. "Do you know about wolfsbane?"

"Of course not." Sam scowled, then followed up with, "What is it?"

"It's a plant that we can take to prevent changing," he said.

"Well, that would have been nice to know about." Sam slumped back into her chair irritably.

"Wait," Carly held up her hands, "I have never seen you change or anything. Do you take this all the time?" she asked.

“Pretty much since Dad went overseas,” Spencer confirmed. He hesitated. “It’s not...great to take a lot of. It can make us pretty weird. But also, I didn’t want to risk anything happening to Carly while I was stuck as a wolf somewhere.”

Carly looked a little stunned. “You’ve stayed human this whole time for me?”

Spencer shrugged. “My job is to take care of you. And if someone ever came here unexpectedly and I had to hide because I was a wolf, well, it wouldn’t look good if people thought I left my kid sister unattended.”

“I’m twelve, not five, Spencer.” Carly was mildly offended, but then she softened. “That’s...sweet, though,” she admitted.

“And explains some things,” Sam jabbed. “You said it makes us weird?” She cocked her head and raised an eyebrow as she gestured at Spencer.

“Well, yeah,” Spencer shrugged helplessly. “Being a little crazy every once in a while is a small price to pay for making sure I can look after Carly.”

“So, wait a minute,” Sam realized something. “If I’m a werewolf, and my mom and my sister are both werewolves, and you’re a werewolf, does that mean Carly...” she trailed off, turning to regard her best friend curiously.

“Yeah, that’s the other thing I wanted to talk to you about...” Spencer grimaced.

Carly stared hard at him, her expression flickering between anger and disbelief and terror. “I’m a werewolf?” she asked in a small voice.

“Afraid so, kiddo.” Spencer watched her uncertainly, waiting for a reaction.

Carly shook her head, baffled. “But...wait, how? I’m older than Sam, shouldn’t I be changing, too?”

“Yeah, well...” Spencer pressed his lips together guiltily, “You know those allergy pills I only make you take for a few days once a month...?” He trailed off, letting the implication sink in.

Carly’s mouth dropped open. “You did not.” Spencer offered another guilty grimace. “Spencer! You were making me take that—that wolfsbane stuff?”

“I’m sorry!” Spencer shouted. “I’m supposed to take care of you, and...I didn’t think you were ready.” His voice softened compassionately.

“Well, maybe you could have talked to me instead of just deciding for me!” Carly got up from the table and paced away angrily.

Sam looked at Spencer uncertainly. She thought that was pretty lousy, sure, but at least he hadn’t left her to change with absolutely no guidance like her mother had. Still, she didn’t think she’d ever seen Carly so mad before, and she’d made Carly mad a lot during the course of their friendship.

As Carly seethed across the room in silence for a long moment, Spencer finally spoke again. "But," he said hopefully, "you'll notice I didn't leave an 'allergy pill' next to your breakfast plate this morning."

Slowly, Carly turned back around. Her arms were still folded, and she looked furious, but also, curious. "So I'll change tonight?" she asked.

"If you want to," Spencer said guardedly.

"I want to," Carly said immediately. "I want to know what it's like. I want to know what I am."

"Okay," Spencer nodded. "If you want, I can take you—"

"No," Carly shut the suggestion down before he could even finish it, which disappointed Sam, a little, because she wanted to know where he was going to offer to take them. "Tonight is just going to be Sam and I," she declared.

"But maybe tomorrow Spencer can take us somewhere?" Sam said hopefully. "No offense, Carls, but being cooped up in your room can be hard sometimes. You'll get it, when you change tonight."

Carly eyed Spencer critically. "Maybe tomorrow, then. If I'm ready to speak to you." And she turned and strode up the stairs and away.

Spencer let out his breath. "Man, I didn't think she'd take it so hard."

"I don't think it's being a werewolf that's hard for her," Sam pointed out. "I think it's being lied to."

"Yeah..." Spencer trailed off. "I just sometimes have to make choices to protect her. Not just because she's my little sister, but also...because of what we are." He looked at Sam imploringly, as if hoping she'd understand.

She did, a little, in that feeling protective of Carly was second nature to her, too. And because the need to keep their inhuman status secret was self-explanatory. But she'd also never want to lie to Carly. So Sam just shrugged. "She doesn't hold a grudge for long. Let her be mad right now."

Spencer nodded, looking disappointed and guilty, and Sam got up from the table and left him alone, following Carly upstairs.

"Wow," Cat says quietly after Sam tells her about how they'd discovered Carly is also a werewolf. "So then...wow. You must've had a lot of fun together."

Sam smiles, despite herself. "Yeah," she says succinctly, "we did."

"What was it like the first time Carly changed?"

Sam remembers this, too, as if it were yesterday. The way they'd stripped naked together; Carly had seen enough incidental nudity once Sam started changing that they didn't think too much about being naked in front of each other—they knew it was practical, and mostly avoided looking directly at each other. The way she'd watched Carly change before her eyes. The way they'd spent the evening together, realizing they could communicate in ways that barely made sense once they were human again, had spent an entire night together almost on another plane of existence, romping through Carly's room, wrestling and playing and marveling at the smells and sensations and understandings they could only access together, like this.

How can she explain any of this to Cat when it's an experience she can hardly put into words?

So Sam says, "Well, that's when I learned how *freaky* it looks when someone changes. Like, it looks pretty messed up, to be honest. And then...I don't know. Being a wolf is so *different* and when there's two of you, it's like the rest of the world falls away, somehow."

"Oh," Cat replies quietly, and it takes Sam a moment to notice the mild undercurrent of sadness in her tone. And, well...Sam gets it. What she'd experienced with Carly is something Cat can never give to her, can never experience with her.

But that doesn't mean being with Cat is *lesser*, in any way. Sam wraps an arm around Cat and squeezes her closer. "Doesn't mean it's better or worse than spending the full moon with a human," Sam assures her. "Carly stayed human for the first several of my transformations and in some ways, it was a lot easier. We could feed ourselves, not have to struggle to open doors. Stuff like that."

Cat giggles. "Oh, no. Did you get trapped in rooms?"

Sam sighs, because it's stupid, but... "Yeah, it happened. That's probably also why Spencer always stayed human. Werewolves really aren't meant to live in apartments."

"Yeah, I can see how that wouldn't work very well," Cat acknowledges in amusement.

But Sam is lost for a moment in her memories, of her years at Carly's side, and their years beneath the full moon together, until finally she shakes her head and takes a deep breath, bringing herself back to the present.

She can see Cat watching her, and from her expression she seems to have a lot of questions, but perhaps she can tell that Sam doesn't really want to talk about Carly much, so she just nods slightly to herself and stands up from the couch. "What do you want for dinner?" she asks.

Grateful to leave the topic behind, Sam sits up eagerly. "Can we have chicken?"

Cat smiles indulgently, "I'll make you a chicken."

The next week or so progresses almost normally, except for the palpable change that is their new relationship, and all the kissing that gets added to their time together in the evenings

after school. Cat's kisses are so *intoxicating*, and she smells *so good*, Sam almost can't bear the fact that kissing is all they're doing right now.

Which is fine, taking things slow is good, Sam knows that.

But also, she just doesn't know *how* slow Cat wants to take things. There still hasn't been any indication that Cat wants to share a bed at night, and Sam doesn't know how to bring it up. Honestly, she's not that good at talking about this stuff. Anything she's done before just kind of...*happened*.

But those moments when they're on the couch together and Cat grabs her and pulls her closer to kiss her harder, or the way Sam can feel her hands grabbing at Sam's shirt, or the way she can hear Cat whimper in her throat as their kisses get more intense, or the way the smell of her skin seems to get stronger as her body gets hotter...Sam knows that it's worth it, and that whatever is in their future is going to be *incredible*.

That weekend, they're supposed to go hang out with Jade and Tori. Sam is trying to be optimistic about it. Maybe it will be good to have a second chance at meeting Tori. Things had been so *intense* last time, with the way their instincts had absolutely taken over when they'd met on the boardwalk. Maybe it had just put Sam on edge.

So Sam tries to tell herself that this time, she's going to *like* Tori. She's excited to see Jade, so that helps, at least. And honestly, Cat's kisses help to keep a smile on her face.

They meet at a sushi restaurant near where Cat goes to school. Sam likes sushi—it is food, so of course she does—even if seafood isn't her favorite kind of meat. She tries not to let this color her expectations for the meet up.

When they meet Jade and Tori in front of the restaurant, Cat gives Jade a big hug first, despite the fact that Jade reacts stiffly, as if she doesn't want one. Sam offers Tori a nod of greeting while their girlfriends hug, and the first thing Tori says to her is, "I figured out why the weirdness didn't happen when we met at Kenan's house."

Sam blinks. She hadn't really thought about this since they'd last spoken, but, sure, okay. "Right. What'd you find out?"

"It was a new moon when we met," Tori says proudly. "So we weren't under the influence of it as strongly. Plus, we were in a new location so there was no territoriality. Whereas last week it was a quarter moon, we were in an area familiar to both of us, and just before we met, we were each in contact with the other's girlfriend." She looks satisfied, "So encountering an unexpected werewolf? It put us both on edge."

"I guess that makes sense," Sam admits. And really, though it's nice to have an explanation, something about the way Tori delivers it...rubs Sam the wrong way. Like somehow Tori is trying to show that she has more werewolf knowledge than Sam or something. Or trying to remind Sam that *she* has werewolf parents that she can *talk* to about things like this, and Sam doesn't.

Maybe it's stupid. *Definitely* it's stupid. It's not like Tori knows her family history. Sam pushes it aside and turns to greet Jade as Cat moves to give Tori a hug.

Though she and Tori glance at each other, eyes meeting for just a moment as the other interacts with their respective girlfriends, but no territorial circling occurs. Sam relaxes.

They go inside and all sit at a booth together, with Sam across from Jade and Cat next to her. She peruses the menu, though her companions seem to know it well enough that they merely glance at it and chat while Sam scans the options. Everything sounds *great*, to be honest. Deciding what to order at a new restaurant can be difficult if she doesn't walk in with a clear idea of what she might want.

When Sam decides and they order, she's a little disappointed to find that she's been left out of the conversation, as the three art school kids, all of whom clearly enjoy school, are deep in discussion about a play they're all working on. Sam hates that she feels left out, and as she fiddles with her chopsticks, she finds her resentment of Tori grows. If *Tori* weren't here, Jade could talk to her about sadistically hilarious videos on FunnyDanger.com, but Jade with Tori is noticeably softer. And Cat...Cat has never given Sam so little of her attention, since they met, but now that her best friend *Tori* is here, sitting across from her, Cat is animatedly chatting and giggling with her about the roles they're playing onstage. It sounds like they're all playing a family together?

Maybe if Sam were actually being *included* in the conversation, she'd want to know more about what this play even is, because the little she's absorbed sounds pretty ridiculous, but instead, she's been cast aside, and her bitterness is only growing.

The food arrives quickly, their sushi platters and a plate of edamame for the table, and Sam is grateful to have something to occupy her since it's clear her dinner companions aren't interested. But the arrival of their food at least derails the conversation about art school, such that Jade, at least, eyes Sam's plate with interest and hitches her chin. "What'd you get?" she asks.

"Spicy Tuna Roll," Sam answers.

Jade nods approvingly, "That's a good one."

Sam samples her first bite, considering, "It's good," she assesses. "Could be spicier."

"You eat Yerbanian hot sauce," Cat smiles fondly at Sam. "Your spice scale is *way* off."

"Wow," Tori comments, "I like spicy, but I could *never*." She shudders.

As mild as Tori's comment is, Sam prickles, and feels *judged*. She glances at Tori's plate and sees that Tori is eating some kind of sushi that seems to have raw eel, crab and tuna in it. Sam feels heat on her chest and finds she can't stop herself from saying, "You know, it's *interesting* how we're all eating raw meat *right now* and no one's stomach is turning on them."

She sees Jade's expression flicker, alight with defensiveness over Tori, but there's also a gleam in her eye that tells Sam that even Jade recognizes that this is a solid jab. She hears Cat inhale sharply, belatedly, as if it takes a second for the implication to hit her.

Tori flushes deep pink, and Sam can *feel* Tori's anger on her skin, and it makes the hair on her arms stand up. But Tori's voice is mostly controlled as she murmurs, "At least I have *standards* about what I put in my mouth."

Sam sees Jade's eyes widen, and flick to Cat, and Sam hadn't even considered that Tori might have been insulting her girlfriend, but now she's absolutely ready to leap across the table and tear Tori apart.

But then she feels Cat's hand under the table, gripping her thigh *very* hard, fingernails digging into her skin through her jeans. A warning. Sam takes a deep breath, and controls herself.

"Have you seen any good movies lately, Jade?" Cat asks, pointedly changing the subject.

Jade's brow is tight with concern, but her voice sounds like her normal careless drawl as she begins to describe the plot to a horror movie she'd seen about a guy who discovers a bunch of Super 8 footage of murders in the attic of his new house. Cat squeaks in distress as Jade elaborates on the plot, and Sam places a soothing hand on her back as she gets invested in Jade's retelling. She ignores Tori completely.

By the time they finish their meals and pay their checks, Sam and Tori haven't acknowledged each other at all. And they still don't, as they leave the restaurant, and Jade says goodbye to Sam and Cat, and Tori says goodbye to Cat, and the same thing happens from Sam's end. When she and Cat finally walk back toward their motorcycle, Sam relaxes.

It takes her a moment to realize that Cat is *not* happy as they climb back on her motorcycle and she hears Cat say in a low, uncharacteristically curt voice, "Let's go home."

Uh oh. A week into dating, and Sam's already in the dog house.

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[A postcard featuring digital art depicting a green mountain with patches of snow at sunset, surrounded by green and yellow trees, labeled "Table Rock" with small text. Larger text on the postcard reads, "Greetings from Greenville, South Carolina]

You know I can't stop thinking about all of it. The secrets we kept, the promises we made, and how all of that's just gone now. Being out here by myself has given me a lot of time to think. I still don't know what I want. Well, I do, but it's not like I can have it. So where does that leave me? In South Carolina, I guess. Good bbq.

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Cat is angry with Sam, almost as angry as she was the night of the tuna fish jump, but it's different. It's tempered, a little, but the relationship that she and Sam actually share now; it's

hard to be angry with someone whose kisses make you want to melt into the floor. It's even mitigated a little bit by the fact that she knows Sam is a werewolf, and clearly there's some weirdness going on between her and Tori that may be beyond both of their control.

But she also doesn't really believe that it's *entirely* out of their control, because Sam settled down when Cat placed that warning hand on her thigh. And that makes her angrier. That Sam *knows* how important these friendships are to Cat, and *still* insulted Tori to her face, with no provocation.

Cat had worried about Sam not liking her friends, but she'd worried about the complete *opposite* happening with Tori. But unlike Jade, who had (eventually) been won over by the fact that Tori wasn't afraid of her, had stood her ground with her, Sam seems only to push harder, to get *meaner*. (To be fair, Cat knows Jade had done that at first, too, but Jade's reaction makes more sense to Cat than Sam's).

As far as Cat is concerned, Sam and Jade *both* exaggerate their meanness to a greater degree than they act on it. She hates when they both resort to it. Neither of them really need to. Jade is *so sweet* with Tori, well, sweet for Jade anyway, and Sam has just started really showing Cat a tender side of herself: the side of her that stares into her eyes, really searching them, and asks if she can kiss Cat; the side of her that moves closer to Cat on instinct, just wanting to be connected to her; the side of her that lights up when Cat comes home from school, the human equivalent of a dog wagging its tail.

But now, as they park Sam's motorcycle and head into the house, Sam's demeanor reminds her more of a dog with its tail between its legs. Her shoulders are hunched forward, head dipped, face hard. Cat hadn't been sure that Sam realized that she is upset, but it's clear now that she does.

Good. That will make this much easier.

As they walk into the house, Cat orders, "Sit," and points toward the couch. She winces mildly at the wounded look Sam gives her as she obeys, body language still projecting shame. "Sorry," Cat amends, "I didn't mean to—we just need to talk."

"I know," Sam says quietly, scowling at the coffee table.

But now that she has Sam in front of her, clearly upset herself, Cat doesn't know what to say, or rather, how to say it. She'd wanted to really lay into Sam, to really stress how angry she is about how Sam had treated Tori, how frustrated she is that they couldn't spend time with her friends, now that she is finally ready to. But she can't quite find the words with Sam looking so dejected in front of her.

Seeing Sam already clearly so ashamed makes her subside, a little.

Cat sits down next to her on the couch. "Sam, I just..." she tries to find the words she'd rehearsed in her head as she'd clung to Sam on the back of her motorcycle all the way home. "I really hated that," she finally says, though it doesn't have the heat it had when she'd first thought it.

“I know,” Sam grumbles.

“Well, I just don’t *get* it! Tori’s my friend.” She sees Sam’s lips tighten at the mention of her name. “I don’t know why you were at her throat all evening.”

Sam laughs humorlessly. “I thought you knew who I was. I don’t like people.”

“Oh, come on! You like plenty of people. You like Dice, and Goomer, and Jade, and Carly—” Cat breaks off as she sees the way Sam’s spine stiffens at the mention of Carly.

“And the list of people I hate is way longer,” Sam growls.

“Okay, but *still*. Even if you don’t like Tori, why can’t you be *nice* to her? For me?” Cat pleads.

Sam exhales through her nose, brows still drawn in a scowl, lips pressed together in frustration. “Maybe I could if she were nice to *me*.”

Cat blinks, utterly confused. “But...Tori *is* nice to you,” she says, baffled.

“I knew you wouldn’t get it,” Sam mumbles, looking away.

“I’m sorry! All I saw was you insulting Tori out of *nowhere* when all she’d done was be friendly to you and found out why something weird happened last time you two met! I thought everything was fine!” Sam doesn’t respond, and continues looking away from Cat. “Sam, please, talk to me. I *want* to get it. Whatever it is.”

Slowly, Sam turns to meet Cat’s eyes for a brief moment. Cat is surprised to see the wounded expression in those glacier blue eyes before Sam’s gaze drops again. “It’s just that Tori and her family...are a *very* different kind of werewolf than me and my family.”

Cat tries to make sense of this, but comes up empty. “What do you mean?”

“I just mean...” Sam sighs, heavily. “Tori comes from a family who—who obviously trust and *love* each other. And I...don’t. And she judges me for it.”

Cat is still kind of lost. “I don’t think Tori judges you,” she assures Sam. Tori has a short temper sometimes, and can bite back when someone comes after her, but in Cat’s experience, she doesn’t really unfairly judge people, or go after them unprovoked.

Sam shoots Cat a disbelieving look. “Sure, okay, she was *real* cool about the fact that I hunt sometimes.”

Okay, Cat remembers that exchange. But still, she has to admit she kind of gets how Tori feels. “I can...kind of understand her reaction,” she concedes.

Sam throws up her hands. “This is what I mean! I’m not like you and your...your *private* school friends. I’m barely going to graduate from public school. *If* I’m lucky. And Tori has a family that actually *feeds* her so it’s not like she’s ever had to rely on her instincts to have a full belly. You all have these *great* families, and I...the Pucketts are just—we’re *trash*. And

Tori knows it. We're the kind of werewolves other werewolves are ashamed of," she finishes, folding her arms, her face hard, refusing to look at Cat.

At first, Cat doesn't know what to say. She feels defensive and guilty and hurt for Sam all at the same time. Finally, she says, "My family abandoned me and moved away." Slowly, Sam turns to look at her, blinking uncertainly. Cat shrugs. "It's true. My parents left. Moved away to Idaho to help my brother. I hardly even speak to them. They tried to get me to stay with my *awful* aunt and uncle and...I ran away. I lived at school for a week or so before my friends caught me and we figured out I could live with Nona instead." Cat smiles awkwardly. "We really don't all have these great families. Jade's parents are divorced and she doesn't really talk to her dad. Both of Robbie's parents are really hard on him. Beck lives in a trailer without even any running water because he doesn't want to live under his parents' roof. Andre's parents are divorced and both travel a lot for work so he mostly lives with his grandma and she's not well..." But as she trails off, she already anticipates what Sam is going to say.

"And Tori?" Sam asks pointedly. Cat shrugs. "Yeah, that's my point."

"Okay, but," Cat tries, "I don't think that Tori is judging you the way you think she is. She doesn't even know your family! And," Cat tries, "If *you* don't even like your family, why are you upset at the idea that Tori wouldn't?"

"Because I *am* my family," Sam says darkly. "I'll never not be."

Cat frowns. "You are *not* trash." Sam just looks at her skeptically. "Sam!" Cat says angrily.

"Even you're disgusted by me, and the fact that I've hunted." Sam says quietly.

"I didn't know it was because you were going hungry," Cat replies sympathetically.

Sam shakes her head. "See, that's the thing. That's part of it, but it's not all of it. The truth is...I like hunting. I *like* it. I like feeling powerful, I like the victory of it. I like it. So, yeah, I maybe got into it because of the nights I couldn't be with Carly and Spencer, I was kinda on my own, and it was a good way to make sure I got fed. And when I was riding across the country on my motorcycle, it's not like I had a ton of money to spare, so it was a good way to get a meal when the moon was out. But more than that, I just *like* it. And that, I guess, is frowned upon, by some people. Even though we're *predators*. It's natural."

There's still a lot that Cat doesn't understand. She can't quite square the interactions she'd seen between Tori and Sam and agree with Sam that Tori was judging her, aside from maybe the comment about hunting, but that hadn't come up today. But she can also see that Sam is hurt, and feeling defensive and ashamed about where she comes from. And her greater desire is to comfort her girlfriend.

She reaches for Sam, and Sam jerks away. "You don't have to pretend."

"I'm not," Cat insists. Sam is quiet, gazing at her guardedly. "Sam, I'm *not*. I don't care if you like to hunt. I—I like you, a *lot*. And I want to be close to you."

Reluctantly, Sam lets her move closer and wrap her arms around her, and slowly, Cat feels one strong arm slip around her waist and squeeze back. “It’s just hard,” Sam whispers, “Spencer and Carly never judged me. And they were—well, their dad was in the military, doing top secret stuff, so they definitely weren’t werewolf trash.”

“I’m so sorry you feel judged,” Cat says softly. “If you want, I can talk to Tori.”

Sam shakes her head, “Nah, don’t do that. I don’t want her to know she got to me.”

“But then, can you *try* around her? For me?”

Sam takes a deep breath, “If she says something first...I can’t promise anything.”

“I’d understand then. But,” Cat pulls away. “But I still don’t even know what *happened* today.”

Sam looks sour. “All you guys could talk about was that stupid show you’re doing,” she grumbles.

Cat realizes it immediately. “You felt left out,” she says, with clarity.

“Well, *yeah*. I’m not in performing arts school.”

“I’m sorry,” Cat sighs. “You were caught up with the menu, and I guess we got caught up talking about our show.” She smiles, slightly. “It’s going to be really good. I was hoping you’d want to come see it.”

Sam shrugs sullenly, not answering the question, just continuing with, “And then Tori judged me for my hot sauce.” It’s almost petulant, the way it comes out.

In spite of herself, Cat laughs, but cuts it off quickly. “Oh, god, no. That’s not what that was about. It was Yerba, not the hot sauce.”

Sam blinks, confused. “Huh?”

“We all took a trip to Yerba for spring break and got thrown in prison,” Cat explains matter-of-factly.

“*What?*”

“It’s true,” Cat nods. “And Tori was in there first, without the rest of us. So Yerba is kind of a hard topic for some of us.” She shrugs, “I didn’t think it was so bad. I joined a prison gang and taught them to dance!”

Sam laughs in spite of herself. “You would.” She eyes her uncertainly. “Maybe I didn’t need to get arrested with you during that ATM incident. You probably would have done just fine in juvie.”

“You would have let me go alone if you knew?” Cat pouts.

Sam's laughter sounds genuine now. "No. I couldn't do that to you," she admits. "I was...I was kinda in too deep already," she admits shyly.

Cat isn't sure what else to say, so she kisses her instead. The kisses are slow, hesitant, like Sam is certain Cat is going to pull away any second, but Cat just wants to be closer, wants to kiss her more. Her anger with Sam has quite evaporated, and her heart is swollen with love for her. She kisses Sam deeply, loving the way it feels for Sam's hands to tentatively grasp her sides, the way it sounds for Sam to emit a low grunt in her throat as the kisses continue.

They kiss for a long time, though kissing is all that happens. Cat *wants* more, oh god does she want more, but she's been holding back, taking things slow. It's complicated, because she's loved Sam for so long, it's hard to know how fast to move, when she's already thought about so many things they might do together, fantasized about so much more than just kissing. But she doesn't know how comfortable Sam is, how much Sam has done, and a part of her worries that even *talking* about it will make it too tempting to be able to resist. And the last thing she wants is to move too quickly and ruin everything.

So she's kept things simple, only initiating kissing, and trying to avoid the temptation to do more than they're both ready for.

Some of that is challenged that night when they're getting ready for bed, and Sam blurts, "What if I want to sleep with you?"

Cat feels her face grow hot as all sorts of images flit through her mind. "W-what?" she asks, giggling awkwardly.

Sam's face is bright red in contrast with her light hair and fair complexion. "I, uh, I don't mean like—well, I don't *not* mean it like that, but like, uh, what I mean is, to *sleep*. In bed together. I want *that*."

Sam is usually so composed, so self-assured, that it makes Cat's face feel hotter and her heart flutter to hear her so flustered. Cat takes a deep breath and runs her tongue over her bottom lip. "I'm afraid that if we do that, I won't be able to control myself."

She sees the way Sam trembles at her words. "Oh," she utters softly.

Cat moves toward her, taking Sam into her arms, kissing her gently, lingering only a moment. "I'm just trying to...take things slow. To savor this," she admits.

"Okay," Sam nods, her voice rough.

Cat wants to ask Sam what she wants, what she thinks about, whether she wants things to be slow or not, but she's too scared. Too scared of what might erupt between them, too scared of letting go of the leash she holds tightly that dictates the pace of their relationship. Because she's already realized that Sam is the one letting her set the pace, letting her decide what happens when.

And she's worried that Sam could just as easily pull her to move faster than she wants. Faster than she *thinks* she wants, anyway. As she continues kissing Sam, at the border between their

sides of the bedroom, she starts to wonder just *why* she wants to take her time anyway?

Cat decides maybe it's time to escalate things. Just a little. Because she *wants* to, and she wants to give Sam *something* even if she's not ready to have Sam horizontal in bed beside her.

She draws back from the kiss gradually, dipping back in for one more kiss as she pulls away, and meets Sam's eyes. "But maybe I could...touch you," she offers, voice quiet, rasping slightly at the edges, betraying her desire.

Sam takes a deep breath and doesn't even ask for any elaboration before saying, "I want you to," in a quick, breathy tone.

This time, as Cat leans in to kiss her again, she lets her palm slide up Sam's side, over the soft t-shirt she's wearing to bed, feeling Sam's breath hitch into their kiss as her hand moves higher, and her fingertips trace along the underside of Sam's breast.

She feels Sam's hands, grasping at her pajama top, pulling her closer, and hears the satisfied hum in her throat at the contact between them. Cat moves her hand a little higher, until her palm is just resting there, feeling the warm, soft skin of Sam's breast just beneath her t-shirt, the impact heady and intoxicating even without any movement of her hand.

Sam isn't moving either, except for the kisses they're still exchanging; her hands are still as they grasp Cat's clothes, she seems to even be holding her breath. Finally, Cat retreats again, pulling away to take in Sam's expression as she begins to move her hand gently over her breast.

Sam swallows hard and gazes at her, taking in a deep breath, her eyes hazy, like a cloudy afternoon sky. "Can I touch you too?" she whispers.

Cat shivers, feeling hot *everywhere*, as she manages to squeak out, "Yes."

Sam is marginally less careful as she lifts her own hand up to place it over Cat's breast, on top of her fleece pajama top. But she pauses once she's placed her hand there, still searching Cat's face, and then Cat remembers her own hand, and spreads her fingers over Sam's breast, trying to feel more of it, trying to encompass all of it.

Sam moans, so breathily that Cat isn't sure she hears it at first, but then it's as though Sam loses patience, or maybe control, because she uses her other hand to tug Cat closer and kisses her, a hard, enthusiastic kiss, and Cat can feel her hand still working over Cat's breast, exploring the area, fingertips mapping it as they kiss and shudder and whimper, still just standing together in the middle of the bedroom.

Cat tries to keep up, her own hand pressed between their bodies as they kiss, but eventually, she pulls away reluctantly, feeling hot all over, limbs trembling, barely able to understand how all that touching through the clothes they're wearing is enough to make her *want* so deeply. "Okay," she manages, voice barely more than a whisper. "I should—I need to go to bed now."

“Okay.” Sam’s voice is a growl, low and raspy, and she takes a full step back from Cat, as if to remove herself from temptation. “Good night,” she tells her.

“Good night.” Cat leans in to press one final swift kiss against Sam’s lips, and before they can get drawn up in touching and holding each other again, she slips beneath the covers of her bed, turning away from Sam, since just *looking* at her might be enough to tempt Cat to take things further than they’re both ready for.

She can tell that Sam is standing in the middle of the room for a long time before she heads to her own bed.

Pink

[A postcard depicting the state of Georgia, with major cities labeled, and images of landmarks, state plants, animals and industries decorating the map. At the top next to the state flag it reads “Greetings from Georgia”]

Decided to skirt some of the bigger cities to see what else there is since I’m going down to hit Florida, anyway. It’s muggy, there are swamps, but there’s also fried seafood so I can’t complain too much. At least not about this state. But I just keep coming back to how I want to complain that you’re gone. Doesn’t do any good, but I want you to know that I can’t stop thinking about it, how I still can’t believe you just left. Hope one of us is happy you did.

-

Sam had been just beginning to process that Valentine’s Day is coming up and trying to decide what she might want to do for Cat when Cat reveals that she “would be honored if you would accompany me to the Valentine’s Sweetheart Dance at school.”

Sam blinks and frowns, “A school dance?” she asks skeptically.

“Yep!” Cat chirps excitedly. “It’s on Valentine’s Day this Thursday!”

Sam is...reluctant. “Are you sure that’s how you want to spend our first Valentine’s Day together?” she asks.

Cat nods, and her expression sobers a little. “I do,” she confirms, more seriously. “I want you to meet my friends, and I want them to know what we mean to each other. And I want you to see my school, so you’ll know what that means to me, too.” Sam feels herself begin to smile reluctantly. Honestly, going to a school dance is about the last place she wants to go but then again, church had been the last place she wanted to go for Christmas, but she’d done it for Cat.

She would do a lot of things for Cat.

But before she can express this, Cat breaks into another grin. “Besides, it’s Valentine’s Day, so it’s *my* day, so you have to do what I want!”

Sam narrows her eyes, “Isn’t that what we did for Christmas, too? When do we get to do what *I* want?”

“We do what you want during full moons,” Cat states.

Sam is pretty sure she’d given Cat a choice about how to spend the last full moon, too. But she’s in no position to put up a fight. She knows that when she’s in—when she has strong feelings about someone, she has a tendency to put them first. At least to a point. It’s not like she’s about to share her food with Cat. So she guesses she really just has one part she’s

willing to push back on. “If we go to this dance, I don’t have to dress like I’m going to church, do I?”

Cat laughs. “No, but give me a couple of days. I’ll get you an outfit I think you’ll like.”

“Okay, if I like the outfit, I’ll go with you,” Sam says, as if she’s in any position to bargain here.

Cat narrows her eyes playfully, then laughs. “Trust me. You’ll like it.”

Cat stays late at school the first few days of the week and when she comes home on Tuesday, she presents Sam with a suit. “Where’d you get this?” Sam asks, feeling the fabric. She’s been assuming that Cat has been going shopping after school, and that’s why she’s been late.

“Oh, I made it,” Cat says simply. “At the costume department at school.”

“You *made* this?” Sam inspects a seam closely. She doesn’t really know what she’s looking for, but there’s nothing sloppy or shoddy about anything she can see of the way this suit is put together that would give it away as handmade.

“Yeah! I get really good grades in costume design class.”

“I can tell.” Sam is awed. She can’t believe she’s still discovering new things about Cat and what she’s capable of.

“Try it on!” Cat urges.

Sam is down to her jeans and her bra before it occurs to her that maybe she shouldn’t just strip down in the living room. She guesses that’s what happens when she’s desensitized to being nude in front of someone else. “Um, let me go back into the bedroom.”

Cat’s eyes are fixated on the exposed skin of her torso. “Kay kay,” she murmurs.

Sam dresses in the suit in their bedroom and is astonished by how well it fits. As she comes out of the bedroom and back up front, she’s already calling her next question to Cat. “Okay, but how did you make it so it fits me *so well*? Don’t you have to take measurements of people or something?”

Cat nods. “Usually, yeah. But I have a really good eye for guessing people’s sizes.” She smiles. “And I’m...getting to know your body pretty well.” She blushes as she says it, and it makes Sam smirk.

“Yeah, I guess so.” Sam looks down at herself. She’d taken a look at her outfit in the bathroom mirror, but that didn’t really give her an idea of the full impact of the suit. But she thinks she looks...*good*.

“Do you like it?” Cat asks, beaming.

“Yeah. Damn, Cat, you really made this? It’s so cool!”

“So you’ll come to the Valentine’s Sweetheart Dance with me?” Cat asks eagerly.

Sam laughs. “Yeah, yeah,” she concedes. “I’ll go to the dance with you.”

“Yay!” Cat actually claps. “We’re going to have so much fun! I can’t wait for you to come hang out with everybody and see my school!”

In spite of everything, Cat’s enthusiasm makes Sam feel like this might actually end up being fun.

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[A postcard depicting an artist’s rendering of an alligator standing on the shore of a body of water in the foreground, with the sun setting behind some palm trees in the background. At the bottom of the postcard is the Florida state flag and the words “Florida: the Sunshine State”]

Didn’t stay too long in Florida. Something tells me I wouldn’t mix well there. Probably just stereotyping but you know, sometimes stereotypes turn out to be true. I think you and I saw how some of that can go. Sometimes I wonder why I’m even still writing these. It’s not like you can write back. Who knows, maybe you don’t want to hear from me, not like this. If that’s the case you can just chuck these. Maybe you already are. I don’t even know how you feel anymore. I barely know how I feel.

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At school on Wednesday, Tori stays late after Sikowitz’s class to talk to him about her character for the play they’re working on, and Cat follows Jade out to the hall while she stops at her locker.

“So, you bringing Sam to the dance tomorrow?” Jade asks, in a tone that sounds like she doesn’t care about the answer at all, but Cat knows better.

“I think she’ll be there,” she says, purposefully cryptic. She’d made sure no one had seen the suit she’d made for Sam yet, because she wants it to be a bit of a reveal when Sam shows up looking so dapper. “You’re bringing Tori, right?”

“No, I thought I’d ask Sinjin,” Jade drawls sarcastically. Cat frowns at the jab at Sinjin, who in his own weird way has always been nice to her, and Jade rolls her eyes. “Obviously I’m bringing Tori,” she says sharply.

“Okay, sorry I asked,” Cat grumbles.

Jade shuts her locker and leans against it, studying Cat. Cat watches her curiously. Finally, Jade says quietly, but bluntly, “What are we supposed to do about the fact that our girlfriends hate each other?”

Oddly, Cat feels wounded. “Tori *hates* Sam?” she asks, crestfallen.

Jade pushes out a sigh. “Okay, not the point, and no, she doesn’t, but she’s pretty sure Sam hates her.”

“Sam doesn’t hate her,” Cat refutes. “She just...struggles. Because they’re so different.” She doesn’t know how much to reveal about what Sam told her, about her insecurities about money and about Tori’s supportive family. She *definitely* doesn’t want to reveal anything about Sam’s actual predilection for hunting, even if she’s sure Jade would just find that cool. But Jade is staring at her expectantly, so Cat says quietly. “She felt like Tori thought she was, like...a *lesser* werewolf.”

Jade blinks, brows constricting in confusion. “Okay, I don’t know what the hell that means,” she states evenly. “But I did tell Tori she was being a little judgmental about the whole hunting thing. I mean, I get it. If I were a wolf, I’d probably want to see what the insides of a deer or something look like. I kind of already do as a human.”

Cat feels a little green at the image Jade conjures up for her. As much as she can accept this part of Sam, it’s not something she wants to think about, firsthand. “I talked to Sam, too,” Cat says. “I think she’s at least willing to try. She says as long as Tori doesn’t say something first...”

“Yeah, well, I don’t think Tori’s desperate to talk about hunting ever again.” Jade sighs, and lowers her eyes. “In a way, I kind of think I might get what Sam means, a little? Tori *knows* how lucky she is, but, she has blind spots. Like everybody. Like, it’s hard to talk to her about stuff with my dad, because she actually *gets along* with her dad. It’s hard for her to imagine hating her dad. That, and she likes my mom.”

“I like your mom,” Cat puts in. Jade’s mom has always been kind to her, and as far as Cat can tell, has always been supportive of Jade’s artistic pursuits, even if she usually doesn’t understand them.

“Ugh!” Jade rolls her eyes. “I don’t get either of you.”

“You and Tori both have nice moms who are there for you,” Cat shrugs, and lets the implication hang there until Jade guiltily drops her eyes again.

“Yeah,” Jade finally says quietly. “You’re not wrong about Tori’s mom. And...I guess my mom isn’t the worst, either.”

In spite of everything, Cat feels the need to defend her own mother, slightly, from the implication that she’s *the worst*, because she *does* love her mom, even if she feels hurt by her sometimes. “I’m glad my mom is there for my brother, but...” But she finds she doesn’t have much else to say about it.

Jade’s mouth twists, and she shifts them away from the understandably awkward topic. “I like Sam,” she says matter-of-factly, “and you know I don’t like many people.” Cat tries to suppress a smile at how similar Jade sounds to her girlfriend in the moment. “And I think Tori will behave if she does.”

“I think Sam will try,” Cat nods. “We’ll just have to...leash our girlfriends, I guess.”

Jade laughs, a sound so genuine it seems to even surprise her. “Wow. You two are into some kinky shit.”

“I, no, I just—” Cat feels her face burning.

“Relax,” Jade winks. “Your secret is safe with me.”

“It’s not a secret!” Cat insists, following Jade as she begins to stride away toward her next class.

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[A postcard featuring a photograph of a very large peanut with the letters “USA” running up the length of it. Next to the giant peanut is a tall monument sign topped with flags that reads “National Peanut Festival”. The text on the postcard reads, “Dothan, AL: home of the National Peanut Festival.”]

Carly,

Towns that have some kind of dedication to food are absolutely the best. I’ve eaten so many peanuts. Like, boiled peanuts? Never even heard of such a thing and it’s like, totally different, like weird little salty delicious peas? The amounts of really specific foods across just America makes me wonder what else is out there that I’ll never get to taste. Like, what’s your favorite thing to eat in Italy? I refuse to let you leaving ruin Italian food for me. –Sam

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Sam is less certain about the Valentine’s Day Sweetheart Dance being fun as they ride her motorcycle to Hollywood Arts on Thursday evening and find a place to park. Sam has been here before, back when they were helping Goomer try to convince his mother that he was a teacher, but Sam honestly hadn’t paid that much attention to the school then; she figured it was just another school, and she didn’t care much. But now she’s seeing it through new eyes, eyes that are trying to appreciate that this is a place Cat finds very meaningful, and Sam wants to understand its significance for someone who she cares about so much.

Besides, last time she’d been here, she’d really only seen that one teacher’s classroom, because Cat had hurried her along and they’d entered and exited the school through an odd side entrance. In retrospect, Sam realizes that Cat was trying to keep Sam from meeting her friends. Exactly the opposite scenario of what she’s doing here tonight.

But now she’s here, with time to take everything in. Sam notes that the exterior is grand, with a big arch with “Hollywood Arts High School” on it. She’d wondered what the gym or wherever the dance was taking place would look like, but she realizes as soon as they pull into the parking lot that there seems to be a lot of activity outside, on the other half of the parking lot. “Wait,” she asks after the motorcycle engine is silent, “is the dance outside?”

“Yeah, this is the Asphalt Cafe, where we eat lunch and where we do most of our big events, so we can just use the outdoor raised stage,” Cat confirms, taking off her helmet and fixing

her hair in one of the motorcycle's mirrors. Beneath her pink leather jacket, she's wearing a pink dress with a tight bodice and a full skirt, with sequins at the waistline and a sheer cardigan over her arms to ward off any chill. It looks surprisingly good for her having just ridden on a motorcycle. "Unless it's a showcase or the Full Moon Jam, then we bring in the larger, lower stage. But the school is open so people can get to the bathroom and stuff," she explains. "And we could put our jackets in my locker."

"Okay." Sam takes that in, mostly the part about how much time it sounds like these students spend outside. "We almost never went outside at my old school. I thought schools that let the students outside was just, like, a TV thing." Though now that she thinks about it, it makes some sense. Yeah, the nights can get chilly in LA, but for most of the school year, being outside during the day isn't going to be totally miserable. Whereas in Seattle, especially during the winter, going outside wasn't something you could necessarily count on because of all the rain, at least in Sam's experience. Though as a kid, they would go outside for recess, and play in covered areas if it was raining, by middle and high school, going outside was more rare, mostly during some miserable gym classes. Which, were those ever *not* miserable?

Cat, however, looks sad at this confession. "You weren't allowed outside?" she asks sympathetically. "Then how did you get your sunshine in?" Satisfied with her own hair, she reaches to fix Sam's hair. Sam shrinks back for a moment, but ultimately lets her.

Sam laughs, "Sometimes there's not much sunshine to be had in Seattle."

Cat quickly seems satisfied with Sam's hair (maybe she decided it was easier to just leave her curls wild and windswept), but seems to be scrutinizing her as they begin to slowly walk hand in hand toward the bustle of activity across the parking lot. "Do you miss it?" she asks.

"Seattle?" Sam asks, and she's about to scoff, but she considers it, just for a moment. For a long time, it had been home, until the night both she and Carly left. Sam hadn't had a plan, or a destination, but she supposes in the back of her mind she assumed she might show up back in Seattle someday, maybe when she got bored or ran out of ways to make money or had too many warrants out for her in too many states or her motorcycle broke down or something. But she'd ended up here, in Los Angeles, with Cat, and really, she's happy with where she's ended up. She gives Cat an honest answer, however. "I miss the forests sometimes," she admits. She knows there are forests in the mountains that surround LA, but she doesn't know them well, and they don't feel the same or smell the same. "But mostly? I don't really miss it. It doesn't feel like home anymore, not since you and I got our own place."

Cat smiles at her, "You made that apartment feel like home to me," she admits. Sam is surprised, and melts a little at the sheer romance of the statement, until Cat elaborates, "When you brought home the furniture from *That's a Drag*, and turned it into a place that felt like *ours*."

Sam smiles wryly. Okay, not *quite* the level of romance she'd thought Cat meant. It wasn't her mere *presence* that made Cat feel at home, it was what she'd brought with her. But Sam recognizes that there is still something special about this to Cat. "Yeah, well," she shrugs, "you're the reason I even stayed," she admits. The way Cat looks at her, it's almost as if Cat is expecting a big reveal, that Sam fell in love on sight or something. Sam hadn't meant to allow for Cat to make the same kind of misinterpretation that she'd just experienced, and she

awkwardly continues, “You opened up your house to me, showed me a good time...I don’t know. I thought you were cool. You made me want to stay somewhere after months of just *roaming*. So, thanks,” she offers awkwardly. “I’m glad I stayed.” She squeezes Cat’s hand.

“Me, too,” Cat beams. She looks ahead of them and says excitedly, “Ooh, there’s Beck!” And she waves excitedly to someone and begins to walk fast, propelling Sam along with her.

Sam scans the crowd, and quickly spots the guy waving back at Cat. She’s curious to meet him, because he’s someone she’s heard Jade mention a few times; apparently, they’re close. She takes him in as the distance closes between them. He’s wearing a gray suit, the necktie tied a bit loose and the top buttons of his shirt undone, and his hair is about shoulder length, swept back from his face; his entire aesthetic seems to be “artfully disheveled,” an appearance that seems effortless but that Sam can tell actually takes some work. She knows because she’s been *actually* disheveled at times in her life, and he pulls it off much better. He’s also handsome, something Sam certainly notices, though it’s not her focus.

“Hi, Beck!” Cat greets with her usual cheer, looping her arm through Sam’s once they’re standing still again.

He smiles genially, “Hey, Cat.” Sam sees the way his eyes dip to take in their entwined arms, then he meets Sam’s eye. “You must be Sam. I’ve heard a lot about you from Jade.”

“Nice to meet you.” Sam grips his hand in a brief handshake.

But Cat is pouting, “Jade told you about us?” She sounds disappointed.

Beck blinks, tilting his head very slightly. “She told me you were roommates,” he says slowly.

“Oh.” Cat giggles. “I thought she might’ve told you that Sam and I are girlfriends.”

Beck grins. “She didn’t mention that, but, I kinda picked up on it.” He shrugs modestly. “Congratulations. You two look great together.”

“Thanks!” Cat chirps. “Who did you bring to the dance?” she asks.

Beck shrugs again. “I came stag,” he says simply.

“You didn’t ask anybody?” Cat asks, sounding surprised.

Beck shakes his head. “I got asked by a lot of people,” he states, without a trace of ego, “But nobody who really caught my eye, so. Here I am.”

“We’re going to have so much fun!” Cat crows, “But first Sam and I are going to put our jackets in my locker.”

“I’ll catch you later, then,” Beck waves as Cat begins to lead them away toward the entrance to the school.

“He seems chill,” Sam states. It’s really the only word she can think of to describe him. “He’s really one of Jade’s best friends?” she asks skeptically. She has trouble imagining the two of them hanging out.

Cat nods, “Yeah, they used to date for a long time, but they’re just friends now.”

“They *dated*?” Sam has even more trouble imagining *that*. And not just because he seems way too passive for someone as intense as Jade. She can at least wrap her head around them maybe balancing each other out in *theory*, but also, she had definitely gotten the vibe that Beck is gay. “That’s weird,” she states.

“Yeah, I was always happy for them, but I think Tori’s a much better match for Jade,” Cat says matter-of-factly. “They fight a lot less.” She leads Sam into the school. The halls are mostly quiet, though there are students moving through them, mostly to and from the bathroom, chatting as they wait for each other, though it’s clear most of the activity tonight is outside. “My locker is this way,” she says.

But Sam slows, making Cat slow with her, as she takes in the hallway, the walls covered in murals, the lockers covered in what must be individual student decorations. “Wow,” she states. Cat had managed to keep her out of this main hallway the other times she’d been here. It’s kind of cool, actually. Maybe she would have liked school more if it hadn’t been so bland and boring. Just this hallway already has a different feeling. She can’t picture Miss Briggs and her pointy boobs popping up to shout at her in a place like this.

When she glances back at Cat, she’s smiling at her. They’re still walking slowly as Sam takes everything in, and Cat finally gestures, “Here’s my locker.”

“Cute,” Sam assesses, taking in the pink locker with palm fronds and the stuffed ladybug on it.

Cat gazes at the locker with fondness. “I decorated it a long time ago. The leaves were to remind me of church, where I started to realize how much I loved performing. They give out palm fronds like this on Palm Sunday. And Miss Lady,” she points to the ladybug, “was my smallest stuffed animal. When I first came here I was worried people would think I was weird for liking stuffed animals but I wanted one here to make me feel at home, too. So I brought the smallest one.”

Sam smiles at this, not sure what else to say. “Would you decorate it differently now?” she asks.

“Probably,” Cat shrugs. “But I don’t mind it the way it is.” She crouches down and opens her locker, tucking her pink leather jacket inside and taking Sam’s from her. “I like that I’m right below Tori’s, too,” she says conversationally.

“That’s Tori’s?” Sam asks, looking at the locker above Cat’s, at the *Make it Shine* light up lettering.

But before she can make any kind of comment, Cat stands up after closing her locker and adjusts the lapel of Sam’s suit with a smile, then leans in the press a brief kiss against her

lips. "Ready to go back out?"

"Do we have to?" Sam asks with a smirk, already knowing Cat's answer.

Cat gives her a reproachful little frown, but her eyes still twinkle with amusement. But then she seems to look past Sam and grins, "Oh, here's Andre! Hi Andre!"

Sam turns in time to see a Black guy with braids wearing a blue suit that fits him well hurrying up to them. In contrast to Beck's carefully unkempt look, Andre looks well-put together, and comfortably so. His manner, however, is frayed at the edges. "Cat, have you seen Tori?" he asks frantically.

Cat shakes her head. "Not yet," she answers. "Andre, this is my girlfriend, Sam."

"Hey, Sam, nice to meet you," Andre says, politely, but rushed, then says in an agitated tone, "I've got to find Tori! We're supposed to perform in five minutes!"

"I'm sure she's somewhere with Jade," Cat offers.

Andre's eyes widen. "The janitor's closet," he hisses, then hurries away to start hammering on a nearby door. "Tori! We're on in two minutes!"

Sam notices how quickly five minutes became two as Cat begins to draw her away, back out to the Asphalt Cafe. "Is he always so..." she searches for a polite way to comment on the fact that Andre seems three seconds away from a total breakdown.

"Just when he's stressed out," Cat answers matter-of-factly.

When they step outside, they almost immediately run into Jade and Robbie among the throngs of students bustling around to a low thrum of music. Jade is wearing a low-cut green dress that doesn't look that different from things Sam has seen her regularly wear, though it's maybe a little fancier, and Robbie is wearing a lavender suit with a bowtie that manages to somehow look both appropriate and awkward on him. Sam supposes awkwardness *is* the appropriate look for Robbie, though.

Cat laughs when she sees them. "Andre is looking for you and Tori in the janitor's closet right now," she informs Jade.

Jade frowns. "Tori's up on stage, looking for Andre," she says slowly.

The silence stretches for a moment, then Robbie says, "Isn't anyone going to go tell him?"

"Nah, he'll figure it out," Jade says dismissively. Her eyes scan over Sam's outfit and she gives a wry smile. "So, Cat convinced you to come, huh?"

Sam shrugs and is about to answer when Cat says lightly, "Oh, it wasn't that hard. I just had to make something she wanted to wear."

Jade nods. "You did well," she tells Cat. "It looks really good on her."

“Thanks!” Cat chirps. “You look good, too.”

Jade shrugs, “Eh, I didn’t want to dress *too* much like I was going to a funeral when it’s a dance with Tori, so I avoided black.” There’s a softness to her expression that looks a little strange on her. “Because, you know, Valentine’s Day is stupid and everything, but I kind of love spending it with Tori.”

“That’s basically why I didn’t put up much of a fight. I wanted to spend Valentine’s Day with Cat,” Sam reveals. “I wouldn’t want somebody else to escort my girlfriend to a Sweetheart Dance.” She smiles at Cat, but Cat is looking at Robbie.

And in that moment, Sam *feels* Robbie react. It’s minor, and she can’t even pinpoint what, exactly, his reaction is, she just knows it’s a stronger reaction than either Andre or Beck had to the news. It makes her turn her attention to him.

He’s smiling, actually, though there’s a touch of wistfulness in his eyes. “So, you two are official, then?” he asks evenly.

“We are,” Cat confirms. She hesitates slightly. “I wasn’t sure how to tell you.”

Robbie laughs softly, “It’s not really a surprise,” he says, his tone gentle, but halfway to a scoff all the same. “It was kind of obvious how much you two care about each other that weekend with the tuna jump.”

Cat meets Sam’s eye and blushes while Jade drawls, “Yup.”

Sam looks over Robbie. “Your tuna fish bites have healed up nicely,” she offers, since his face looks clean and smooth now.

He smiles, looking down at himself, though most of his skin is covered by his clothes. “Yeah, most of them didn’t even scar! And that weekend wasn’t all bad, anyway.” He meets Sam’s eye again. “Your friend Freddie is *quite* a fellow.”

Sam raises her eyebrows. “Yeah, he’s alright,” she says disinterestedly. She sees the way Jade is looking at Robbie, brows drawn in bemusement.

The awkward moment passes as they all see Andre hurry past them. Jade’s eyes light up. “They must be about to sing, come on, let’s move where we can see them.”

They follow Jade as she moves in front of the stage, and sure enough, Sam can see Tori standing up there, in a short purple dress that shows a lot of leg, next to Andre, who looks out of breath as he stands next to her and the two of them chat for a minute. Some other students are standing nearby with instruments, clearly waiting for Tori and Andre to take the lead.

Beck sidles up next to them, “Oh, hey, Robbie, hey Jade,” he greets.

“Shut up.” Jade’s gaze doesn’t break away from Tori as she whacks his shoulder with her hand. “Tori’s about to sing.”

“Okay,” Beck acquiesces, rubbing his arm and frowning a little.

And, indeed, a few moments later, Tori is standing at the railing of the raised stage, microphone in hand. “Good evening, Hollywood Arts!” she calls.

“Hope everybody is enjoying the Valentine’s Sweetheart Dance so far,” Andre chimes in. He’s next to her, with a guitar and a microphone of his own, and he sounds utterly relaxed now.

There’s a chorus of cheers from the students around them, even Jade. Cat slips her arm through Sam’s and leans against her.

“Well we’re about to *slow things down* a little,” Tori announces, drawing out her words for emphasis.

“So grab onto your sweetheart,” Andre says.

“Or anyone else who makes a good dance partner,” Tori cuts in.

“And we’ll play our new song for you. This is *Half Moon Girl*.”

As Andre and the band start playing music, Sam watches the way Tori’s gaze immediately finds Jade, and she shoots her a smile. A glance at Jade shows that she’s smiling back softly as she gazes up at her, until Tori turns to Andre and they begin to sing.

“Wanna dance?” Beck asks Jade casually.

“No,” Jade scoffs. “You should dance with Robbie.”

“I, uh, I’m not sure—” Beck seems to fumble over his words.

“It’s all right!” Robbie comes over and drapes his arms around both of their shoulders and begins to sway. “We can all group dance!”

“Right, sure,” Beck agrees, putting his arm on Robbie’s shoulder and swaying, too. Jade remains still, arms folded.

Abruptly, they’re interrupted by a dark-haired girl whose ample chest is emphasized by the sparkly bodice on her deep blue dress. “Beck!” she hollers, “You have to dance with me!”

“Uh, Trina, I—okay,” he concedes as she drags him away.

“Typical,” Jade drawls after him. Robbie moves as if to stand in front of her. “Absolutely not,” Jade says sharply, and he drops his hands with a squeak of terror. Jade turns to continue watching Tori, and Robbie awkwardly wanders away, mumbling about getting some punch.

Sam is very tempted to follow him to the snack table (she can smell all sorts of delicious treats under the stronger scents of deodorants and shampoos and subtly applied perfumes and bad teenage boy colognes), but she turns her gaze to Cat instead, who looks at her through her eyelashes. “Well?” Sam asks. “You wanna dance?” She knows this is a moment they need to seize, their first dance together while Cat’s friends play a song. Surprising even herself, Sam decides food can wait.

Cat's smile widens, "Of course I do."

Sam assumes she'll lead, if only because she's ever so slightly taller. Or at least, she usually is, when she's wearing heeled boots and Cat is wearing sneakers. Cat has on heels for this dance, so they might be the same height. But Cat seems to anticipate that Sam will lead, though she looks surprised at the way Sam begins to lead them in something a little more formal than the typical high school slow dance, with the placement of their hands and the nudges Sam uses to lead Cat into slow steps and turns rather than simply swaying.

"You know how to dance?" Cat asks in astonishment.

"Sure I do." Sam replies easily. "My mom put me in a lot of dance lessons as a kid, when I was doing pageants and stuff."

"You did *pageants*?" Cat sounds truly shocked.

Sam grimaces. "My mom put me in them," she repeats, so it's clear that, like the dance lessons, they weren't her idea. "But I'll admit they appealed to my competitiveness. I even managed to beat LeAnn Carter one time. Take that, LeAnn," she finishes under her breath.

Cat giggles. "I can't believe I still get to learn new things about you."

Sam guides her into a spin, then pulls her back close to her once again. "Well," she says quietly, "we have a lot of time to keep learning."

She sees Cat's gaze turn warm with adoration at the words, at their implications. Sam isn't ready to declare anything, to make any promises about their future together.

But she's willing to let Cat know that she wants things to stay just like this for a good, long while as they dance under a sliver of a waxing moon in the gloaming evening sky, in Cat's high school parking lot, which somehow manages to feel like a place where genuine romance can happen.

Maybe it's partly the atmosphere created by Tori and Andre's song, with the way their beautiful voices blend and harmonize, the simple but powerful lyrics about yearning for a girl. But Sam doesn't want to give Tori that much credit.

As the song ends, Sam carefully lowers Cat in a dip, much to her obvious delight. As the final notes of the song give way to silence, students break into thunderous applause, and Tori hugs Andre in celebration. They thank the crowd, and the band, and the dance continues with the kind of music that had been playing before, except louder, as the dance has truly kicked off now.

Though they drew apart to applaud the song, Sam is still very close to Cat, and she murmurs, "Want to go get snacks?"

"Tori's coming down, I want to say hi to her," Cat insists. She eyes Sam. "I'd like it if you would, too."

"I'll behave," Sam mumbles.

Indeed, Tori comes bounding down the stairs with Andre at her heels and flings herself right at Jade, who gives her the kind of kiss that makes Sam unsure whether she wants to look away or watch. It's brief enough, though, that she doesn't really need to make a decision.

"Your song was great," Jade says, her tone almost stern. "But you owe me a *lot* of dances since you made me miss that one." She nods to Andre, who is behind Tori. "Good job, Andre," she offers, her tone still that same even, sharp one.

"Thanks. I think," Andre adjusts the lapel of his suit jacket, and then spots Sam and Cat and strides over to them. "Hey, sorry I blew you off earlier. Sam, right? From *iCarly*? I'm Andre Harris."

"Yeah, I'm Sam," she confirms. She sounds more standoffish than she means to, but she hadn't been expecting to be associated with her webshow here, when she's Cat's date (and girlfriend). She tries to warm up her demeanor. She doesn't want to get off on the wrong foot with another of Cat's friends. "I liked your song. It was catchy as hell, and I really liked a lot of the lyrics."

Andre grins. Already, this feels like talking to someone on the complete other end of the "chill" spectrum from the guy who was screaming and pounding on the door to an empty room not even ten minutes ago. "Thanks, well, truthfully Tori wrote most of the lyrics, but the melody was mostly me." He glances over to where Tori and Jade are standing close, chatting. "She and I work really well together. I'm gonna miss that when high school is over."

Sam isn't sure what to say to that, but Cat optimistically says, "It's not over yet!"

"That's true," Andre agrees.

Moments later, Beck comes back over, running his hand through his hair. He looks quite rumpled, but not artfully so now. Tori looks at him with concern and draws Jade over to ask him, "Oh my god, what happened to you?"

"I just got away from Trina," he moans, running a hand through his hair several times, as if trying to get it to look attractively windswept again.

"Why is she even here?" Jade asks in a hostile tone. "I thought we wouldn't have to deal with her after she graduated."

"I don't know, I think she still follows Hollywood Arts on Splashface, maybe she had nothing better to do." Tori winces and offers Beck an awkward smile. "I'm sorry about her."

Beck shakes his head. "It's not your fault. Good job on the song, guys. At least." He frowns. "I *think* it was good? It was hard to hear with Trina talking in my ear the whole time."

"You should've just danced with Robbie," Jade smirks.

As if on cue, Robbie rejoins them, excitedly announcing, "Guys! They made *heart-shaped* hotdogs! Have you ever seen such a thing?" He laughs as he holds up his hotdog bun, with

the awkwardly shaped hotdog inside. "I'm not sure how I'm going to eat it," he realizes. Then he seems to catch himself, and says, "I loved your song! I wish I'd been able to see better from over by the snack table, but you *sounded* great!"

"It's okay, Rob, there wasn't much to see," Andre assures him.

"It was really good, though," Sam reiterates, this time wanting to be sure that Tori hears it, too. For Cat's sake.

Tori smiles graciously at her, and Cat pipes up, "It was the *perfect* dancing song!"

"I know," Jade drawls, scowling. "And I spent it down here by myself."

"I'm sorry I couldn't dance with you and perform up there at the same time," Tori rolls her eyes affectionately and presses a kiss to Jade's cheek. "I'll make it up to you," she murmurs quietly enough that Sam wonders if she's the only onlooker to hear, and watches the way Jade's lip twitches.

Okay, Sam feels like she's handled her obligations for the moment when it comes to hanging out with Cat's friends. She turns to Cat. "I've *got* to get one of those heart shaped hotdogs. You understand."

Cat laughs, "Okay, let's go to the snack table."

"I'll lead the way," Robbie offers gamely, and everyone seems to be on Sam's wavelength, because as a group, they begin to make their way across the Asphalt Cafe to find the snacks.

The spread of snacks is certainly better than anything provided during events at Sam's old public school. She idly wonders how much it costs to go to school here, but pushes the thought aside, not wanting to get bitter about anything. These students clearly love their school, Sam tells herself to be happy for them. It's not as though school is something she places much value in, and she doesn't think even attending here would make that much of a difference to her.

But it's easy enough not to dwell on growing up without money when there's food to eat. Sam loads up a plate alongside everybody else. She's only half-listening as Cat chats with her friends, though this time, she doesn't feel left out and ignored like she had the time at the sushi restaurant. She's not sure what changed, but she's *happy* to see Cat enjoying time with her friends, instead of selfishly jealous.

The conversation even turns to that same play they had been discussing before, and Cat turns to Sam and asks, "You'll come see our play, right?"

Sam wonders if there will be snacks at the play, too. But now that she's here, and somehow doesn't feel *completely* out of place among Cat's art school friends, who have all been nothing but nice to her (even Tori, at least today), well...yeah, maybe Sam is feeling more interested to see what kinds of things they might be doing here. "Yeah, I might," she says, still not wanting to promise anything. "When is it?"

“Next weekend,” Tori informs her. “We have shows on Friday, Saturday and Sunday.”

“I’m sure Saturday would be fine, but opening or closing shows are sometimes the most interesting,” Jade puts in.

“Sounds good,” Sam says easily, though she’s immediately aware that next Sunday is the first night of the full moon. She’s *so* low on wolfsbane. She wonders what else Cat might have planned for them, coming up, on full moon nights. Their world is opening up, Sam has begun to integrate with Cat’s friends. It’s the final semester of school for all of them, and it’s clear that, while Cat used to be content to come home and just *be* with Sam, she’s also going to miss these friends, she’s going to want to spend quality time with them, before they all disperse for college or whatever is next. Sam knows that if she and Carly were both still in Seattle for their senior year, she’d probably barely leave Carly’s side. Then again, she’d probably also be finding a way to go with Carly to whatever college she wants to attend, even if Sam weren’t a student, because *she’s* always been willing to fight for their connection, but —Sam doesn’t want to think about all that. She gets it, is all. She understands the bittersweetness of a diaspora of a friend group, even if she’d had to condense all those difficult feelings into one night, because there had been *no* warning that Carly was about to leave the country and change *everything*.

But she’s here now, with Cat, and these potential new friends, plus the other friends she’s made—Dice and Goomer and, well, not Nona exactly, but in a pinch she could probably turn to her for something—and they’re all people she’s met through Cat. And maybe, if she wants to continue living in Cat’s world with her, she has to make an effort to make some peace.

Which, since she’s less inexplicably angry with Tori right now, seems almost possible. Besides, it isn’t as though there’s anyone else she can ask about where to find wolfsbane. It’s not so much a change of heart as a reprioritization of need.

Jade stays pretty close to Tori for most of the evening, which isn’t exactly surprising, but there’s a moment in which Tori goes off to get them both some more punch. Sam asks Cat if she’d like some more punch, too, and slips off to follow her, crossing her fingers that this doesn’t turn into another group trip to the snack table.

It doesn’t, and she finds herself standing behind Tori, whose back is to her as she ladles punch into two little plastic cups. She turns around, looking utterly unsurprised to see Sam standing there, and offers a cautious smile. “Here for punch, too?” she asks. Her tone is friendly enough, but Sam can sense the undercurrent of uncertainty in it.

“Yeah, Cat wanted some more,” Sam explains unnecessarily. But she doesn’t want Tori to just walk away while she’s dishing out punch, so she adds, “But also, I wanted to talk to you.”

Tori tilts her head to the side curiously. “Oh, okay. What about?”

Sam gives her a significant look as she moves over to the punch bowl. Tori understands immediately and nods, then stands waiting for Sam to dish out two cups of punch herself, then leads Sam over to the furthest little circular table at the Asphalt Cafe, away from

everyone else. They both set their cups of punch down and stand near enough to have a conversation, but not so close that they look suspicious.

“So, what’s up?” Tori asks, her voice low.

“So, um,” Sam runs a hand through her hair. “I just wanted to say that...I’m sorry.” It’s actually difficult to get out, but thinking of Cat allows her to push through.

Tori raises her eyebrows. “You’re sorry?” she asks.

Sam assumes she’s milking the apology, and grits her teeth as she elaborates. “Yeah, for like, attacking you or whatever. I was feeling weird about everything and I shouldn’t have taken it out on you.” After talking to Cat about everything, some of this actually feels true. It had been Sam’s own issues more than Tori...existing that had caused her to feel insecure.

Tori shakes her head, “No, sorry, I just mean...thanks. I wasn’t expecting you to apologize. I wasn’t exactly at my best either. After talking to Jade I realized I was being kind of judgy. I didn’t mean to be. But, Jade judges everybody, so she’s the expert,” Tori laughs, a little awkwardly.

“Yeah, she’s right,” Sam reveals, shoving her hands into the (functional!) pockets Cat had sewn into her suit.

“I’m sorry if you felt that way,” Tori says, gesturing at Sam, “You...obviously you’ve had a different experience than I have! And that’s cool! I’d actually like to hear about it. It’s not often we sort of run into each other in the wild, you know? Or, well, not even in the wild. You know what I mean.” She takes a sip of her punch, as if cueing herself to stop talking.

“Yeah,” Sam nods. She hesitates, then says, “There’s one more thing.”

“Sure. What?”

“I was hoping you could tell me...where I could get some wolfsbane? I took my mom’s stash before I left Seattle and I’m almost out.”

Tori’s face seems to fall a little and she nods, knowingly. “Ah. Right, okay. Yeah, actually, I can.”

There’s silence for a moment, and then Sam asks, “So...will you?”

“Yeah, sure.” But Tori doesn’t say anything else.

“Okay, what’s your deal?” Sam asks, growing irritated.

Tori shrugs. “Sorry, I just wondered if you’d even have apologized to me if you didn’t need something.”

Weirdly, though Sam is fuming a little, she understands how Tori actually balances out someone like Jade. Clearly, she isn’t the type to let Jade get away with anything. “I don’t—okay, fine, probably not. But it’s not just about the wolfsbane. It’s also for Cat. She clearly

loves you, and I...care about her, a lot. And I hate this weird territorial shit that hangs between us. I've never felt like this and it wouldn't be a big deal if Cat weren't important to us both. But she is. So I'm *trying* to find a way to get along with you."

Tori nods, and she looks marginally warmer now. "You know what, I know exactly what you mean. For Jade, too. She thinks you're awesome, and I love her. So...I'm willing to try if you are."

"I *am* trying!"

"Well, so am I!"

They both huff in silence for a moment, until Tori starts laughing. Sam scowls for a moment, but finally starts laughing, herself.

"Okay, about the wolfsbane. I'll have to talk to my family and see who can give me a ride. I can't take Jade there. She's too nosy. But, I'll text you?"

Sam nods. She can accept that. "Okay. I'll give you my number."

They pull out their PearPhones and exchange numbers and the formality somehow feels like a pact. Like they're on a secret mission together, to *not* spoil the friendships their lovers hold so dear.

"Guess we'd better get this punch back to our women."

Tori snorts. "Jade would *love* to hear you refer to her that way."

"Well, it's true, isn't it?" Sam waves her hand dismissively.

"It's true enough," Tori concedes. "And, um, just one more thing." Sam pauses, both cups of punch in her hands, and raises her eyebrows. "Not to bring things back to...us fighting. But that comment I made about what you put in your mouth? I *wasn't* talking about Cat, I swear. Jade pointed out that it could've been taken that way and that's the last thing I want."

Sam nods slowly, digesting that. "So...it was just about what I eat when I'm a wolf, then?"

Tori's mouth thins and she winces, slightly. "Listen, I don't want to argue with you about any of it. When it comes down to it, I shouldn't knock what I haven't tried."

"Yeah, you really shouldn't," Sam says quietly. "Especially when you haven't *needed* to do it." She'd been a little reluctant to revisit that detail, but she figures in this instance, Tori's guilt will be more powerful than Sam's shame.

Tori's eyes drop, and it appears Sam is right. "Yeah," she agrees quietly. She lifts her gaze to Sam's and offers a smile. "So, let's just...start over. No weird circling. No territorial bullshit. Just...two awesome werewolves about to bring our hot, talented girlfriends some punch."

It's corny, and Sam suppresses rolling her eyes, but she nods in agreement, "Sounds good to me. But we'd better go, before they think we've killed each other."

“Jade would be upset she missed it if we had.”

“You know what, I would be, too, if I were her.”

-

[A postcard featuring a drawing of a red tent pitched in front of some green pine trees, with stars in a dark sky overhead and a little campfire nearby. Below the drawing are the words “Bienville National Forest” in Mississippi]

This was kind of a great little spot to spend a few nights. A forest that is very different, but still felt homey, in a way. I feel like I could get used to any forest, at this point. It’s weird how where we grow up marks us in certain ways. Like all my time in the forests near Seattle. What if we’d grown up in the desert or something? Would we be different? What if I’d grown up without you? Would I still be here?

-

They ride home after the dance and Cat feels simply *elated*. Everything went *so well*, Sam and Tori hadn’t fought; in fact, the two of them came back from the snack table together at one point looking almost *friendly*. Sam had agreed to come see Cat in her play—something that Cat hopes will lead to more of Sam watching her perform, because she definitely has more performances before the school year ends. Sam had gotten along with her friends and seemed to understand just why Hollywood Arts is so important to Cat. In short, everything feels good and easy and now they’re home, alone, in their apartment, on Valentine’s Day.

And Sam looks so damn *gorgeous* in her suit and leather jacket, and Cat watches as she takes off her helmet and shakes out the golden waves of her hair. Cat feels a pang, a squeezing in her chest, like the ache of sweetness, and can’t believe she gets to have Sam at her side.

When Sam turns and smiles at her, Cat grabs her by her leather jacket and yanks her close to kiss her.

There’s a muffled sound of surprise against her lips before Sam kisses her back with vigor, hands sliding down the curve of Cat’s waist, where they rested for so much of the dance, but moving, tentatively, behind Cat, hands curving gently over her ass, ostensibly to urge her closer, but Cat’s heart is beating faster in her ears at the sensation of Sam’s subtle groping.

It’s like a whirlwind of passion overtakes Cat. She can’t remember ever feeling this strong of a need before as she tugs Sam into the apartment. Sam’s jacket is pushed off of her shoulders, landing with a heap on the floor next to the back door, which Sam barely has time to fully shut before Cat’s lips are on hers again, and Cat is guiding her back to their bedroom. Cat shucks off her own leather jacket, trying to at least hang it on the tall purple chair they pass next to the crafting nook by the patio door, but she misses, and certainly doesn’t care to pause their ceaseless kisses to hang it back up.

Before long, they’re in the bedroom, still kissing. Cat hands are on Sam’s chest, grasping the soft flesh beneath her white button up, and she feels like she can *taste* the desire when Sam groans into her mouth. She’s trying to push Sam’s suit jacket off of her shoulders, and she

feels Sam shifting, resisting her, and draws away from the kiss enough to realize that Sam is trying to tug off the boots she's wearing.

Cat laughs and sits back on her bed, watching Sam curse and struggle and finally have to crouch to unlace them before they'll come off. Cat casually kicks off her heels—which come off easily—and leans back on her hands as she watches Sam sit in the middle of the floor and hurriedly remove her boots.

When the boots are off, Sam looks up at her with wild eyes, like the foam of a turbulent sea, and Cat shivers, from both desire and apprehension.

Sam stands, her white shirt untucked, the waist of her pants off-kilter, her jacket halfway off one shoulder, looking tousled and *sexy*. Cat scoots back on her mattress a bit, giving Sam room to join her, and in moments, one of Sam's knees is on the mattress, between Cat's legs, and Sam is leaning over her, arms behind her as she hurriedly tosses her suit jacket away.

Finally, one of them speaks, and it's Sam, voice a husk of hunger. "I want to unzip your dress."

Cat feels the profound impact the words have on her, and closes her eyes for a moment to savor the sensation of arousal, then opens them. "Please," she whimpers, leaning up to kiss Sam again.

Now Sam's hands, rougher than hers, begin pushing Cat's cardigan off of her arms, and Cat feels the smooth skin of her palms, caressing her arms and shoulders before drawing the straps of her dress down, letting them drop down near her elbows. Cat doesn't have time to pull her arms free before Sam's hands are sliding around to her back, searching for her zipper. She gently pulls away from kissing Cat, brows knit in concentration as her fingers push through the red ringlets of Cat's hair, still searching. Finally, she finds it, and leans forward, and Cat gasps at the sensation of her warm lips pressing kisses at the junction of her neck and shoulder, and feels Sam's hands, more certain now, move her hair out of the way so she can draw the zipper down Cat's spine.

Cat feels shivers all down her body at the first touches of Sam's fingertips on her back, beneath her dress, and the sensation of that plus the gentle tug of teeth at her throat produces a desperate, breathy whine in her throat, and she feels the momentary pressure of Sam's blunt nails against her skin in response.

This time, when Sam draws away and looks at her, she seems beyond words, and Cat watches the way her eyes dip to Cat's chest, to where the bodice of her dress loosely covers her breasts. Cat is breathless at the implication, but draws the straps of her dress fully down her arms, and slowly tugs the bodice down to uncover her breasts; she isn't wearing a bra with this dress, doesn't need to.

She watches the way Sam draws in a deep, shaky breath, and her eyes flash, almost looking as bright and luminous as they do in the moments before Sam changes into a wolf, and her mouth stretches into a hungry grin, baring her teeth.

For a moment, Cat feels a spike of fear, and remembers worrying about Sam as a wolf eating her, remembers the way Sam's muzzle looked bloody after eating the meatballs, remembers Sam hunting, and her breath is caught in her throat as Sam lunges.

But it's only to press needy kisses all over Cat's sternum, mouth dipping over to kiss along the soft curves of her breasts, and Cat is immediately transported to pleasure, her moment of fear only seeming to elevate it, and her fingers curl into Sam's hair, urging her on, as Sam begins to bear her down onto her back on the bed and straddle one of her legs, tongue now flicking aimlessly over Cat's nipples. Between strokes of her tongue, Cat hears her growl, "I want you so much," which makes her stomach flip hard.

It takes Cat a moment to make sense of the sound of her own pleased cries; she never knew she could *sound* like that, has never experienced something so intense at someone's else's hands (or...mouth), and in a moment, she's caught between her sheer bliss, and never wanting Sam to stop because if she doesn't stop then it might be enough to...but yet also, Cat is embarrassed, by the sounds she's making, by her level of wantonness, by how much she feels like she *needs* this, and the sudden flush of shame gives her pause. And once the shame takes root it only grows, and Cat feels flashes of *good girls wait for marriage* and *if you move too fast your partner won't respect you* and other notions she thought she'd let go of, but now, on her back with her dress half off and with her girlfriend of only a few weeks (despite how long Cat has loved her) worshipping her breasts with her mouth and whispering about wanting her, and Cat is abruptly too anxious to go any further than this.

"Wait," she breathes, reaching for the side of Sam's face to coax her into lifting her head.

Sam doesn't resist her and looks up at her, eyelids heavy, face flushed, "Yeah?" she asks.

"I think," Cat swallows, "I have to stop. Before I..." she trails off, not certain *what* she's worried about happening, exactly, and whether she's worried she'll feel too good or bad.

Sam takes a deep breath, expression slowly sobering, and she leans forward to kiss Cat on the forehead. "Just let me know when you're ready for...more. I don't want to do anything that scares you."

"I'm not *scared*," Cat protests, and blushes as Sam lifts her eyebrows skeptically. Cat wonders if Sam can literally *smell* her mood, and then the thought of the sensitivity of Sam's nose makes her blush even deeper. "I've just never done this before," Cat admits quietly.

Sam blinks. "Oh," she murmurs, shifting back so she's sitting at Cat's feet. Cat sits up, lifting the bodice of her dress back up to cover herself. "I guess I didn't think about that."

Something occurs to Cat, when she thinks about Sam's confidence, Sam's skill. "Wait. Have you...done it before?" she asks.

Sam chews her lip for a moment before admitting. "Yeah."

"With who?" Cat is curious, but not jealous. "Freddie?" She ventures a guess, because he's the only person she can remember Sam mentioning a romantic past with, even though Sam had also indicated it had been short-lived, and not great.

“God, no,” Sam scoffs, chuckling. She takes a deep breath, “I really wasn’t expected to spend Valentine’s Day talking about...” she trails off.

“You don’t have to tell me,” Cat offers, though she’s reluctant, because she really, *really* wants to know, because if Sam doesn’t tell her, then it becomes like a *secret*, and all Cat will want to do is uncover it.

Sam shakes her head. “No, I should. You deserve to know. It’s just that it still really hurts.” She sighs, and rubs her face. “Off and on, for like three years when I was in Seattle, Carly and I were...a thing. And we eventually, definitely...had sex.”

Beaver

[A postcard split in half by text reading “Greetings from Pine Bluff, Arkansas.” The top half of the postcard features a photograph of autumnal trees alongside a body of water. The bottom half of the postcard features a photograph of a tree-lined empty road in full, green summer with a blue sky full of fluffy clouds overhead.]

Carls,

Okay the food in the south is definitely incredible (I ate my veggies and they were all fried, thank you very much) but oh my god I am being eaten alive by mosquitoes. And sometimes when I’m riding during the day the air feels like hot soup and it’s a wonder I don’t pass out in my leather jacket. Makes me wonder what the weather’s like in Italy. Don’t they say it’s hot over there? Also sometimes I think about how you ended up there and I’m the one who knows Italian. The world is backwards and we’re proof of that.

-

Sam’s memories of being with Carly are always just beneath the surface, and when she thinks of her, so many moments come to mind. Moments of joy, moments of connection, moments of pain and pleasure and confusion and clarity but most of all, love.

If they didn’t have any plans in the “human” world, most full moons for the next several years were still spent in Carly’s apartment, usually in the third floor studio space which, less than a year after Carly started changing, became the iCarly filming space. Every couple of months, Spencer would borrow Socko’s RV and take them out into the forest, and she and Carly could run and romp and play to their heart’s content.

Sam had, unfortunately, also had to spend a couple of full moon nights with her mom. After it became clear that Melanie wasn’t at all interested in bonding over being a werewolf with Pam, she’d tried to force a connection with Sam. Like most of their interactions, it had ended in a fight. The difference was, when they were wolves, the fight wasn’t verbal.

At least it gave Sam firsthand knowledge of how wounds healed when she changed forms.

About the only other thing Sam learned from wolf nights with her mother was how to hunt. Though, to be fair, it wasn’t Pam who taught her. Pam had brought her out into the woods, wanting to “show her the ways of the Puckett wolves.” Sam thought this might mean some of her uncles, who she idolized, might show up, but it was just her and Pam, and after they fought, Sam roamed the woods by herself, avoiding her mother.

(It was only later that Sam’s respect for her uncles began to diminish, when she realized that not a single one of them ever stepped up to explain anything to her about being a werewolf or help her prepare for it. She was pretty sure it was at her mother’s behest, but it still hurt to

realize that she'd been left to change alone for months without any guidance, even from the only family she thought she actually liked.)

But while avoiding Pam in the forest, Sam had caught sight of a rabbit and in a moment, her teeth were around its neck. As she shook her head to snap its neck, she felt the anger and hurt her mother had produced in her, felt herself pouring it into her kill, and she growled and bit and shook her head until her mouth was wet with blood.

When she finally dropped the small carcass, she was surprised by how unbothered she was by her action. If she hadn't been caught up in her emotions, maybe she never would have followed her instinct to kill, but now that she had...well, it seemed only natural.

And she was hungry, and the taste of it on her tongue set her mouth watering.

Sam ate the rabbit, and was pleased by how satiated she was.

She still relied on hunting on the full moon nights she was left alone, which wasn't common, but did occasionally happen. With Carly, however, there usually wasn't a need, because Spencer was there, human-formed as always, with food for them. Carly had heard Sam describe the thrill of hunting, but thought bunnies were too cute for her to want to eat them. She didn't begrudge Sam her fun, but she explained she'd rather just eat a nice spaghetti taco than have to eat something that tried to get away from her.

But it wasn't a night in the forest when everything changed.

It was a night in Carly's bedroom.

In truth, it wasn't entirely unexpected. In their day to day life, things felt almost the same, but Sam had started to notice that things felt a little different when the full moon came. It felt like...electricity, between her and Carly.

Sam assumed that it was some new werewolf sense kicking in now that they were a little older, and had been changing for a few years. Maybe it was simply a recognition of the wolf inside the other, an awareness of who you might change with you under a moonlit sky.

That would be a useful thing, but Sam also noticed she didn't feel it around Spencer, or her mom.

She'd tried to ask Carly about it, but Carly had just blushed, and said she didn't know what Sam was talking about.

And Carly had started turning away from Sam when they'd undressed, waiting to change.

But it wasn't until the last night of a particular full moon cycle that things fully clicked for Sam.

They'd had a normal enough wolf night together at the Shay apartment, playing and even hanging out and watching TV, until eventually they curled up together on Carly's bed. Usually, Sam still slept on Carly's loveseat, but it was a chilly night, and Carly had

whimpered and coaxed Sam into joining her on the bed, where they kept each other warm at night.

They woke up together as humans, still snuggling close, completely naked.

Sam opened her eyes first. They must have shifted as they changed back, still seeking the warmth of the other's body, but they were facing each other now. Carly lay next to her, and Sam marveled at her pale skin, her dark hair, so captivated by her face that she barely even looked at the rest of her nude body, which was by now almost as familiar to Sam as her own, from all the times they'd changed in front of each other. She was so pretty it made Sam's heart speed up.

And moments later, Carly opened her eyes, and her lovely dark gaze met Sam's.

And in that vulnerable moment, just after sleep, Sam knew.

She knew what the electricity between them was, and it grounded just as Carly's lips touched hers.

In retrospect, it had been difficult for her to identify because her feelings for Carly, her attraction to her, had been growing for far longer. Sam had been nursing a crush for a long time, since she became aware, around the time she turned twelve, of what crushes felt like, and realized it was how she felt around Carly.

She just never expected Carly to feel the same way.

But the full moon seemed to bring it out in her, and Sam realized that the powerful connection she felt between them, as the moon waxed fuller each month, wasn't simply attraction. It was the reciprocation of it.

Sam thought, as they kissed, and kept kissing on Carly's bed, that everything in her world had begun to fall into place.

But when they finally talked about it, days later, on an evening in which Freddie wasn't around to interrupt them, Sam realized she had to guard her heart.

"I don't know how to explain it," Carly wrung her hands and then buried her face in them. She finally looked up at Sam. "I love you, Sam. I really do. You're my best friend, and I never want to lose that. But, it's like the full moon makes me crazy or something!"

Sam felt that like a kick in the stomach. "So kissing me is crazy. Got it."

"No, it's coming out all wrong." Carly groaned, and flopped back on her bed. "I hate this. I hate that I feel this way. But, Sam, when we're not around the full moon, I don't...want you like that. I just don't. I want guys, I like guys."

Sam took a deep, steadying breath. "So I'm just someone you want to kiss once a month."

"Well," Carly's eyes turned coy, "more like...a week a month. But...yes."

Sam nodded slowly. "I can live with that."

Carly looked surprised. "You'd still...want that?"

"Of course. I'm happy being your best friend every day of the month. But, I've also...liked you for a while. Like, that way. And if you only like me back sometimes..." Sam shrugged. "It's better than no times."

"Sam," Carly looked pained. "I don't want to hurt you."

Sam waved a hand dismissively. "I don't care what happens otherwise. As long as the full moon stays ours."

"Okay," Carly smiled. "I can do that."

And in spite of the limitation, Sam was happy. She adored Carly, and it seemed abundantly clear that Carly adored her, too, even if she didn't always express it physically. And as the full moon grew closer, the anticipation that built between them was exhilarating, until they found a private moment to tuck away together; the giddiness of it all making them giggle as they began to kiss ferociously, until their giggles died away into sighs of contentedness, and it felt for all the world like this was exactly where they both wanted to be, stealing secret kisses like declarations of love for a quarter of their lives.

Sometimes it even felt like Carly looked forward to full moons more than she did, with the fierce way she would tug Sam into her bedroom, or into the studio space, and push her up against the door to kiss her. She made Sam feel wonderfully desired, every month.

That didn't mean it was easy, watching Carly crush on boys and even try to date them a few times over the next year or so that their intimacy remained contained on full moon nights or mornings when they actually had the time and privacy to explore in their human forms. Because of the limits of their intimacy, it was nothing but kissing for a long time, and they were slow to even round second base, something Sam waited for Carly to initiate, something that delighted her when she finally did.

And in the meantime, she secretly hated every boy that Carly ever had her eye on, and secretly resented Freddie for wanting exactly what she wanted. And secretly laughed at him during the times when she did have Carly.

There were even a few times when Sam tried to date boys, too. Just to see if she could. Nothing about them held anything near the appeal of Carly, who she wanted so often but could so rarely have.

The only time that really had an impact was the time she'd dated Freddie.

Which...had only partially been about him.

She remembered what had led up to it. A full moon night, in which they'd taken wolfsbane because they had plans, but had ended up in a sleepover in Carly's room afterwards. Sam was sixteen by now (and had spent an amazing birthday on the full moon in the forest with

Carly), Carly was almost seventeen, and aside from the fact that Carly hadn't really been trying to date boys that much, things had remained pretty consistent between them, in terms of their secret only under the full moon relationship (seriously, it was a total secret, even Spencer didn't know, because Carly was afraid he wouldn't let Sam stay over if he did).

Sam was on top of Carly as they made out on Carly's bed, and things kept getting hotter between them. It had been like that for a while, really since touching each other's breasts became common. Their hands kept wandering. Sam held back, still waiting for some kind of signal from Carly that she wanted more, and in the haze of her arousal (which always seemed amplified on wolfsbane, she noticed), she thought she'd gotten her cue, with the way Carly's fingers dipped beneath the waistband of her jeans at her side next to her hip. Nudity had become a little more...fraught, since this started. It happened gradually, but what used to be so common for them that they'd barely even glanced at each other when they were naked, was now something much rarer, accidental glimpses in the windows of time between undressing and changing, or changing and redressing, for instance.

Sam pulled back from kissing her, gasping and breathless. She meant to ask what Carly wanted, whether she wanted to try something new, but in the end, she couldn't find the words. So she moved her hand, gently, to press between Carly's legs, through the layer of her jeans, watching for her reaction.

She could see the way Carly blushed crimson and shook, slightly, but then there was Carly's grasp around her wrist, stilling the motions of her hand. Carly took a deep, steadying breath, and said softly, "I'm not ready."

Sam winced, more at herself than at Carly's response, because she worried she'd ruined the moment by...just going for something she'd erroneously thought had been invited. "Sorry. I'll stop. We can just kiss."

Carly hesitated. "When I do that, I want it to be special." Sam stared at her, uncomprehendingly. Was Carly saying what they had wasn't special? "I mean," Carly tried again, clearly reading her expression. "I want it to be with someone who I want to be with all the time. Not just because the moon makes us...want each other."

Sam's mouth thinned. "You know I want you all the time," she said quietly.

It was Carly's turn to wince and look away.

Sam nodded slowly and lifted herself off of Carly, putting some space between them. "Okay. So. Because you still see this as...something not normal for you, even though it's my truth all the time, you don't want this with me. You don't think it is worth it." It wasn't about the lack of sex, not really. It was about what Carly not wanting her revealed to Sam: that Carly still didn't think this was anything other than some lunacy that came over her. Sam thought she might've handled Carly simply saying she wasn't attracted to her like that better than Carly insinuating that none of the passion and intensity of emotion that passed between them every month was real.

"Sam, that's not what I—"

"No, I get it." Sam shook her head. "We've been doing this for almost two years, Carls. And I've always wanted more, and I've always let you set the terms of this. But I can't do it anymore."

"You're breaking up with me?" Carly asked in a small voice.

"Well, I dunno know what else to do. You're the one who doesn't actually want to be with me!"

"Fine, then!" Carly snapped. Her temper tended to come up on wolfsbane, too. "I'm going to go find a nice boyfriend who I can be with all the time then."

"You know what? So am I!" Sam shouted back. "I guess it's time to see what's so great about guys since you seem to think they're the only thing that matters!"

She couldn't tell whether Carly looked more hurt or angry, but Sam knew she'd touched a nerve. Carly forced a cruel laugh, "Yeah, okay, Sam, good luck finding a guy who will put up with you!"

Sam snorted in response. "I've seen the guys who will go out with you. Somehow I don't think it's going to be that hard."

And she walked away from that fight more determined than ever to get a boyfriend, who she knew would mean nothing to her.

It wasn't the first time she and Carly had fought. Like every time, it didn't last, and once the full moon had really begun waning, Carly had approached Sam with an apology, which Sam accepted. Carly offered friendship—and nothing else—and Sam never wanted to be cut off from Carly. They shifted back into being best friends as if it were any other month, when Carly's desire for Sam waned with the moon.

The difference was, Sam was still hurt and angry. She just didn't want to take it out on Carly anymore.

Maybe the wolfsbane had contributed to her temper, too.

Sam actually almost forgot about her brief notion to find a boyfriend. Like her fight with Carly, the passion for it seemed to die with the luminescence of the moon. But when an opportunity fell in her lap, Sam took it.

The opportunity came in the form of some new device Freddie had made for a science project that read someone's mood on their face.

Sam's mood was "in love."

Which...she hadn't exactly wanted to confront it before, because she and Carly had only ever exchanged expressions of love platonically, but...yeah, she was in love with Carly. She had been for some time.

But Freddie couldn't know that. No one could know that.

And even Carly was clearly in denial about it, and encouraged Sam to ask out Brad, since she must have feelings for him, and since she'd been so emphatic about wanting a boyfriend lately.

It was almost like Carly was testing her, even though she seemed utterly genuine.

But Brad held no appeal to Sam.

Freddie, though...

Freddie was a friend (as much as she'd tried to deny him the title for so long). And, really, he wasn't bad-looking. Out of every guy Sam knew, he was probably the one she could trust the most, if she really needed to.

And they both had something very deep in common: loving Carly.

If Freddie had to think Sam was in love with someone, though, Sam thought it had better be him. Because if he had any more time to think about it, the real answer was staring him in the face all along.

So Sam kissed Freddie.

And, to get away from everything, she checked herself into a mental hospital.

It was both a move that would make sense, if she had actually found herself having feelings for Freddie, and a good excuse to get away from Carly for a while and clear her head. But there was no real clarity to be found. Sam still loved her. But she also figured...why not date Freddie, for two reasons: it would be a real attempt to see if she could connect romantically with a guy, because there was probably no other guy besides Freddie who she could imagine anything like that with, and also, it wouldn't be something Carly could ignore.

Carly had been jealous of other guys Sam had flirted with or briefly dated in a junior-high kind of way, even way back before anything had happened between them. Sam had always wondered if that meant something.

She and Freddie didn't even last a month together, and it was tumultuous and they got along worse than they ever had, even worse than back when Sam had been openly hostile to him, back when he was just the annoying little pipsqueak who never bothered to hide his crush on her best friend. But it wasn't the fact that they were making each other miserable that spurred their actual breakup.

It was Carly, yelling at Spencer about his own relationship, and very clearly projecting about Sam and Freddie's fundamental incompatibility.

Which...she wasn't wrong. But Sam still offered Freddie a heartfelt goodbye, for unwittingly helping her with her experiment.

About a week later, Sam and Carly finally talked about it. Sam had been wanting to bring it up, but wasn't sure how. She didn't even know if Carly knew she'd overheard her ranting to

Spencer about how wrong his relationship was, enumerating all the flaws it shared with Sam's relationship with Freddie.

But Carly was the one who actually brought it up. Sam had come over one afternoon because Carly said they should read through some recent comments on iCarly to see if there was anything that needed their attention. Sam had been sitting on one of the bean bag chairs in Carly's room for a while, Carly next to her, the two of them quietly scrolling through comments, occasionally sharing ones that caught their attention. Several times, she'd heard Carly take a breath, as if she were about to say something, but then didn't speak.

Until, finally, Carly blurted. "I'm sorry about you and Freddie."

Sam lifted her head to look at her, setting aside her Pearbook, and raised her eyebrows. "I'm not," she said simply.

Carly's shoulders slumped. "Okay, I mean, I'm not really sorry about that part, you two were so not right for each other. Like, that was a disaster."

Sam laughed. "Yeah. You're not wrong."

"I'm more sorry that I lost my patience with you two, so many times, instead of just talking to you."

"Well, like you said, we kind of deserved it. We were terrible together."

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean you had to hear what I thought." Carly looked at her, eyes dark, regretful. "I know you overheard what I yelled at Spencer."

"You..." Sam huffed out an incredulous laugh. "Of course you knew." There was no doubt that Carly could have smelled their proximity. Sam had only assumed she was too distraught to notice. "But I think you should apologize to Spencer before me."

"I already did," Carly sighed. "I don't even really care if he wants to be a weird little man baby with his old babysitter. I just couldn't take you and Freddie anymore..."

"I know, we were annoying," Sam conceded. "I shouldn't have even tried to date him."

"It wasn't just that you were annoying, which you were," Carly admitted, though she also glared at Sam playfully at her accusation. But then her eyes dropped. "I was jealous," she whispered.

And all at once, Sam remembered the brief window of time in which Carly had become convinced that she loved Freddie after he saved her life. Sam hadn't exactly been wrong when she'd told Freddie that Carly didn't actually love him, she just felt gratitude for him, but...it had also been her own quiet act of sabotage.

She wondered if Carly's outburst to Spencer had been more calculated than she'd realized.

All Sam could really think of to say was, "Jealous of what?"

Carly's expression was pained as she looked at Sam. "I was jealous of Freddie." She looked like she was about to reach for Sam, but thought better of it. "Sam, I messed up, when I let you go."

"You didn't let me do anything," Sam argued, just for the sake of arguing, really, because honestly, she was afraid to let herself be hopeful, she was afraid to let Carly back in.

"But it was my fault!" Carly argued back. "I wasn't ready, but...I am now." Sam was quiet at this, not sure what to say, and Carly continued, "I think the moon was showing me a truth I wasn't ready for yet. But I'm ready now," she repeated.

"What do you mean?" Sam asked quietly, still not daring to hope.

But it was as if Carly didn't hear her, because she was still explaining something, and Sam tried to focus on her words. "I was scared," she said simply. "I was scared, and, you know, every emotion seems stronger on wolfsbane, so...I froze up, when you wanted more from me. I told myself what we had wasn't real, but...it's the realest thing I've experienced."

Sam started to melt, even though she didn't want to. "Carly," she breathed quietly. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

Carly nodded slowly, gazing at Sam. "Can I please just kiss you now?" she begged softly.

Sam obliged her immediately, and guided Carly to her for the tenderest kiss they'd shared yet. When it was over, they pressed their foreheads together and just breathed for a minute. It felt right. They smelled right together. It wasn't at all like Freddie, who despite the fact that he maintained good hygiene, simply had a particular undercurrent of scent on him that Sam just didn't like all that much. All of Carly smelled good. It felt right.

"I'm sorry," Carly whispered.

Sam shook her head gently, keeping their foreheads close. "I'm sorry I dragged Freddie in between us. But maybe I owe him the apology more, if I could even ever tell him it wasn't even really about him..."

"You dated him to drive me crazy?" Carly asked, voice mildly outraged, but with a hint of amusement beneath it.

"That wasn't the only reason. I was also trying to figure myself out."

"And what did you find out?"

"That I only want you."

Carly blushed and tried to hide a smile, as her expression sobered. "I'm sorry I ever tried to push you into dating Brad. That was...petty of me."

"Eh, to be fair I did say I was gonna get a boyfriend. But Freddie made more sense than Brad."

“Freddie and you didn’t make any sense at all!” Carly argued, and Sam laughed, because she couldn’t refute it. “I wish I’d figured myself out sooner.” Carly lamented, sitting back from Sam, trying to meet her eyes. She was still clearly trying to explain to Sam what had gone wrong, still trying to offer context for how things had gone so badly between them. Sam appreciated it, though she had already forgiven Carly. She was sure she could forgive Carly anything. “The moon was trying to tell me, but I was scared,” she repeated. “I’ve always liked guys, and I still do, so it was easier to just focus on that. Because I’ve always been so... normal. Especially compared to people like you and Spencer. And I know how much easier it is when people think you’re normal. And I already had one secret to hide, and I didn’t want another one, even though I sort of made you one anyway, but, I wasn’t ready to accept that I’m...bi.” She let out her breath in a whoosh. “That’s the first time I’ve said it,” she admitted.

“If it makes you feel any better, I’m pretty sure I’m gay,” Sam replied easily.

“But that’s what I mean, you’ve always been sort of an outsider, that’s something I’ve always loved about you. But that means it’s also...less shocking, coming from you. For me...I didn’t know if I was ready to give up being seen as ‘normal.’”

“Okay, but you know you’re not normal, right?” Sam said bluntly. “You’re weird as hell, Carls. People don’t notice because you’re funny and smart and so goddamn pretty, and you probably are gonna be the vice president someday.”

Carly frowned, “Yeah, I don’t think we should take the prediction of a guy in a mental hospital as reality when it comes to that...”

“I just mean I get it. You feel like you have more to lose by being openly...queer or whatever. Even though the world is getting better all the time with this stuff, it’s still scary. And despite...everything about me, it’s not like I’m out and proud either.”

“That’s the other thing. I don’t know if I’m ready to be...out. But I still want to be with you. But not if being a secret is going to hurt you.”

Sam shrugged. “I don’t know. We kept this a secret for like two years. We can keep it for longer. But I really don’t think anyone would care.”

“I still worry about Spencer. Not because I think he’d care for, like, moral reasons. But I don’t think he’d let you stay over. He doesn’t want to do anything that would make people think he’s an unfit guardian for me, and letting my girlfriend stay over might turn some heads.”

Sam wondered if Carly meant her dad, or her grandfather, or maybe Mrs. Benson. But she also thought that if people really cared about who kids were raised by, she would’ve been taken from her mom a long time ago. “So, he’s just gonna stick with the setting a lot of fires tactic for making people think he’s a fit guardian?” she pointed out.

“I’m not saying it makes sense. But you know as well as I do that people get extra weird when sex is involved.”

“You...want sex to be involved?”

Here Carly blushed so hard she had to take a moment to compose herself. "I do," she said quietly. "Not, like, right now," she clarified quickly. "But soon."

"I'd like that," Sam murmured, leaning in to kiss her again.

It wasn't until later that she realized they were nowhere near a full moon. They were at less than a half moon, a waning crescent in the sky, and Carly wanted her, wanted to be with her, wanted sex with her.

And it turned out that by "soon," Carly meant about a week later.

It was summer, and Sam went over to Carly's on a Friday night. The plan was to spend some time brainstorming for their next iCarly broadcast before taking their top ideas to Freddie to flesh out all together at a later date. Sam figured it might be like a lot of other sleepovers: eating in front of the TV, maybe even falling asleep on the couch, before ending up in Carly's room where they'd make out until they were too tired to stay up any longer.

But this time when Sam came over, she noticed that Carly locked the front door behind her. "Let's go up to the studio," Carly suggested, pressing the button for the elevator.

"Sure," Sam agreed, since it was a good atmosphere for brainstorming for the show. They stepped into the elevator, and she asked. "Where's Spencer?"

"He's standing in line for that World of Warlords action figure release with Freddie."

"That's right," Sam said, as though she remembered, though truthfully, she didn't remember hearing anything about this. It was probably so boring she'd just completely tuned out Freddie and Spencer talking about it.

When the elevator opened into the third floor studio, she noticed that Carly pressed the "door open" button.

"Keeping the elevator open?" Sam asked curiously.

"Just trying to make sure no one comes up," Carly replied. Sam looked at her then, hearing the forced nonchalance in her voice, and Carly looked at her, very directly. "Sam?" she said, her voice almost a whisper.

"Yeah?" Sam asked, her own tone already softening to mimic hers.

"I'm ready."

Sam felt her heart beat faster, heard the rhythm of Carly's heart, even a few feet away, speed up, matching the pace of her own exactly. Already, Sam felt hot, her limbs felt light, her belly fluttered. "You're ready?" she repeated, not sure what else to say.

Carly nodded, and smiled tremulously. "Yes," she confirmed quietly, walking into the studio, Sam trailing after her in delight and bemusement.

"Here?" Sam asked, gesturing around them.

“Here,” Carly nodded decisively. “It just...felt right. This whole space has been for so long a celebration of us, of our friendship. We made iCarly together and...I want to make love together, too.” As she said it, she seemed to wish she hadn’t. “Maybe it’s corny. We can just go down to my roo—”

Sam interrupted her, kissing her. “It’s perfect,” she breathed.

A slow smile transformed Carly’s features, making Sam feel like she was falling in love with her all over again. Or maybe it was really for the first time. Sam didn’t think she’d fallen in love with Carly before. It just...was suddenly there one day. Or maybe had been there all along. It hadn’t felt like falling, it felt like noticing something that had been quietly present all along, waiting for Sam to acknowledge it before it began to fit into every aspect of her life. Loving Carly had been like finding out Sam was a werewolf: briefly astonishing at first, but it very quickly began to make a lot of sense.

But now, Sam felt that free-falling sensation in her stomach, that floating sensation in her head, that full and bursting sensation in her heart as she kissed Carly, pouring every emotion, new and old, into the connection of their lips, until finally Carly drew away, and Sam watched as she began to remove her clothes.

And though this was something she’d seen Carly do numerous times, even if it had become something that in recent years they did facing away from each other more often than not, the experience was unlike any other time they’d disrobed in front of each other. The context of their desire, the knowledge of Carly’s full-throated desire for her, made every new inch of skin that was revealed feel like a brand-new work of art that Sam wanted to study in depth, to understand, to adore.

She was so caught up in watching Carly and slowly taking in her newly-nude form that it didn’t occur to her until she met Carly’s eye that she was still fully clothed, in contrast with Carly’s nudity. “I, uh,” Sam tried, pausing to clear her throat, “I should...probably...”

She didn’t finish the thought, but Carly spoke in a low voice positively thrumming with need. “Do it.”

Sam was quickly topless but nearly tripped getting herself out of her jeans, because of the weight of Carly’s ravenous gaze on her, which abruptly made her knees feel weak and her arms not work properly. She almost laughed, and recalled the moment in which she’d changed into a werewolf for the first time and had gotten tangled in her jeans, then, and Carly had to help her out of them.

And almost as if Sam’s memory spurred Carly to action, there she was, steadying Sam, and guiding her, not entirely gently, to sit on one of the bean bag chairs in the studio. Sam watched dumbly as a nude Carly knelt before her and tugged her jeans down her legs and then, glancing briefly at Sam’s eyes as if to check in with her, began to tug down her underwear, too.

And they were nude together, not for the first time in their lives, by a long shot, but for the first time in which it was very plainly erotic.

Carly kissed her, again, leaning over her on the bean bag chair, and soon they were kissing harder than ever, and Carly was half on top of her, and hands were wandering over smooth skin.

But despite the expressed purpose of being up here, alone, together, naked, no one's hands had breached unexplored territory yet. Sam could feel Carly's nerves, could smell her anxiety. Sam understood, in a moment, how Carly wanted everything to go right, to make up for the last time they'd tiptoed up to this line and everything fell apart, but she was paralyzed by her own worry that she was going to mess things up.

Good thing Sam had always been too bold for her own good.

She shifted, pushing Carly onto the other bean bag chair, and moving quickly to straddle one leg, kissing Carly again. She listened to the sound of her breath, as her hand moved lower, fingertips grasping her hip bone, feeling the way Carly shifted beneath her, opening her legs wider, moaning an affirmative sound.

The moment Sam touched her, they both began shaking. Sam knew, for her, it was partly the full impact of the knowledge that she was the first person to touch Carly like this, to give her pleasure, born of love, and if Sam had anything to say about it, she'd be the last person, too.

Sam buried her face in Carly's shoulder as her fingers moved, exploring new territory, and though a lot of this was easy, because they knew each other so well, and loved each other so deeply, Carly helped her find the right places to touch, helped her find her rhythm, and kissed and encouraged her until the bliss of it all sent Carly keening into the night.

And when Carly flipped Sam over to return the favor, Sam thought she might black out at the first touch of Carly's fingers, thought she would forget to breathe, that her heart might forget to beat, that she might just simply die because of how much she needed this. She was already so close from touching Carly, she was sure it wouldn't take much.

And it didn't, not really, but as Sam gasped out directions to Carly for how to touch her, their kisses grew briefer, until Carly was simply staring down at her, eyes bright with affection, full lips stretched into a grin both tender and lascivious, and Sam felt those dark eyes drink her in as her orgasm hit.

It wasn't until later, after they snuggled and kissed in the bean bag chairs, cocooned in the afterglow, even after they'd eaten some dinner and actually managed to do some iCarly work, that Sam realized that it was the night of the new moon.

If Carly had been trying to prove just how much she wanted Sam, well...Sam felt the warmth of it like a smoldering ember in her chest for weeks afterwards.

And while sex under the new moon had been validating, gratifying, and the deepest expression of love Sam thought possible, sex under the full moon was raw passion, barely contained.

It was just after Carly's seventeenth birthday. That night was the first night of the full moon, and they'd celebrated her birthday the way they'd celebrated Sam's, with a trip to the forest,

and they spent the next night together as wolves, in her apartment.

And when they woke up together at dawn, naked in Carly's bed, it felt, for a moment, like they were still both wolf-formed, the way they tousled and wrestled on top of the sheets, until they started kissing, and their moans were almost growls, and their fingernails ran down each other's skin, and it was hot and primal and utterly wild as they explored new ways to give each other pleasure, with teeth and nails, their bodies grinding together.

After they both came, they lay in a panting heap, and Sam spoke the first words either of them had exchanged since waking up. "Happy belated birthday, Carls." Carly laughed, and kissed her, and it was like language broke the spell, and they felt human again, and kissed tenderly until they fell back to sleep.

It was lucky there was still one more transformation in their near future, and they only had to hide their hickies and scratches from Spencer and Freddie for a day before they disappeared in the healing properties of shapeshifting.

Things continued like that for the next year or so, their secret relationship, the furtive sex in Carly's bedroom, or sometimes in the iCarly studio space again when they were either feeling a bit reckless (things definitely were a little wilder around the full moon, whether wolfsbane was involved or not, and sometimes the possibility of being discovered turned Carly on, despite it being her stated worst fear otherwise) or sentimental (this characterized the times they knew they couldn't be interrupted, and wanted to make love in the space that had been their collaborative playground). Carly went on a date or two with guys during that time, just to keep up appearances; Sam thought it was kind of stupid, but okayed it because it made Carly feel more secure, and because it was obvious, from the smell of Carly when she was around those guys, that she didn't want them.

By now, Sam knew what Carly smelled like when she wanted someone, because she wanted Sam.

There had even been talk of finally telling their friends, being a couple publicly, because Carly was almost eighteen, and figured when she was eighteen, Spencer wouldn't have anything to worry about with Sam staying over. Sam kind of suspected that everyone already knew anyway, but liked the idea of being able to be open about it.

But before it could happen, everything changed, and in a night, Carly had decided to leave the country.

It felt true, and honest, when Sam had told Carly that she couldn't blame her, that if her dad had showed up out of nowhere to take her to Italy she'd be tempted to go with him, too. But it also felt a little bit like a dream, like a reality Sam was going to wake up from. It felt like she was expected to give her support, in this room full of other people, but deep inside, Sam anticipated that when they were alone, Carly would reveal to her that she couldn't go, she couldn't leave, that she wanted to stay there, with Sam.

Even the final broadcast of iCarly didn't feel like the last, though the reality of saying goodbye to Carly started to sink in, right around the time that Carly, playing the idiot farmgirl, flirted with Sam's cowboy character by calling his moustache a squirrel. It had

always been Sam's favorite sketch, for obvious reasons, and it hit her then that it was impossible to know when they ever might perform it again. But Sam tried not to worry. Even if Carly did go, Sam expected she'd be back in a month, maybe two.

It wasn't until she and Carly had a minute to themselves, in her room, after Spencer had walked out, pretending not to cry, that Sam realized she was planning to stay for a lot longer.

"You're really packing up a lot," Sam commented, as Carly filled her bags.

"Yeah, it's gonna be a long trip," Carly replied. There was a slight tinge to her voice that made the back of Sam's neck prickle.

"Yeah, but I'm sure they have laundry machines in Italy," Sam forced a laugh, frowning a little as she saw how many clothes Carly was planning to take with her.

Carly glanced at her guiltily. "My dad thinks that I should really plan to stay there for at least a year."

"A year." Sam repeated the words dully, her tone devoid of emotion, because she couldn't even fathom what she was being told. "But you told him you didn't want to stay that long, didn't you?"

Carly shook her head, slowly, avoiding Sam's eyes. "No. I...agree with him." Sam could see that she had squeezed her eyes shut, an attempt to keep her emotions at bay. "I never get to spend any time with him, and even there, he's going to be busy a lot, but I want the chance to actually get to know my father, as someone other than a distant military hero. And it will probably take me at least that long to really learn the language anyway, which I'll need to really have the experience of living there..."

"Carls, I get that you want to spend time with your dad, but..." It sounded pathetic, especially in light of everything Sam knew about Carly's father, and how she'd always wanted him to be a bigger part of her life. In truth, Sam knew this was something of a dream come true for Carly, and it felt supremely selfish when she uttered, "But what about us?"

Carly reached for Sam's hands and tugged her close, pressing their foreheads together. Sam closed her eyes, drinking in the simple intimacy. Even after three years of kisses, and a year of exploring so many different ways of having sex, having Carly this close to her still affected her, a lot. It was primal, almost chemical, beyond her control or comprehension, but her blood felt drawn to Carly, always. "There can still be an us," Carly whispered.

"But how?" Sam asked, voice raw as she tried to hold back her emotions. "I feel like I've already spent years waiting for you, and now that I finally have you, and you're leaving...I don't know if I can wait for you again."

"You don't have to wait. We can still be together." Carly sounded earnest, optimistic. "It won't be that bad." She sounded like she was trying to convince herself as much as Sam. "We can videochat, and text all the time. Things can stay the same."

Sam pulled away, because it hurt to hear Carly say things would be the same when they couldn't be like that, close enough to touch, for at least a year. "They won't be the same," Sam murmured. "You know that. You have to know that."

Carly's lips were pressed together and she stared at her bag, stuffed full of clothes. "I want this," she said, gesturing to her luggage. "But I don't want it to cost me you."

"I can't do distance with you. I just can't. I can't be with you without—without being able to smell you, without being able to touch you and taste you—" Carly shivered at her words, closing her eyes. "Without being able to hear your heart beating with mine," Sam finished quietly.

"I love you," Carly whispered. It was desperate, it was broken. It hurt Sam to hear.

It was also the first time she'd said it, at least the first time she'd said it where Sam knew the words meant something different than they always had. This wasn't platonic love. This was something deeper, fuller, broader, an all-encompassing flood that sloshed over them both, threatening to drown them.

But Sam knew that such a flood was ultimately a futile display of nature's majesty.

"I love you," Sam echoed, "I have for such a long time. But I can't be with you if I can't be with you."

Carly was crying freely now. "I still want to go," she choked out. "I hate that I still want to go."

"I still want you to go." Sam reached for her hands, and it was her turn to draw Carly close, to wrap her in a hug. She whispered harshly in her ear. "Well, that's a damn lie. I want you to stay right here with me. But...I get it. I fucking get it. I wouldn't ask you to stay when you could be about to do something that could be the best decision you ever make. I couldn't." That was something of a lie, too. All she wanted was to beg Carly to stay. Being noble didn't suit Sam, but Carly often brought it out of her.

"I didn't want it to—I was hoping we could—" Carly couldn't quite get her words out through her tears.

Sam drew back, putting her hands on Carly's shoulders to look her in the face. "Go." She tried to sound encouraging, but her voice was broken, and she knew she sounded angry. She was angry, she was hurt. But she also knew there was no point in fighting this. "Go enjoy the other side of the world. I'll be okay," she lied to Carly's face.

Carly threw herself at Sam for another strong hug, and then a kiss, messy and desperate and tasting of tears, before she drew away, wiping at her face and mumbling about needing to finish packing.

"I'm going to go eat something," Sam announced, because food, at least, had never let her down.

But she found she didn't even have an appetite for food, and just drank a root beer instead.

Yet despite the conversation in Carly's room that broke them up, saying goodbye to Carly in the elevator, after offering her the iCarly remote to take with her (because, Sam knew, this was truly goodbye, and Carly clearly knew it, too), was one of the hardest moments of Sam's life.

And after that, there was nowhere else to go, but anywhere else.

Sam straddled her motorcycle, went home to pack a small bag of her own, stole her mom's entire stash of cash and wolfsbane, and hit the road.

She spent months on the road, through the end of spring and most of the summer, trying not to think about Carly but of course thinking about Carly every damn day. She sent her postcards; she'd called Spencer, once, to get Carly's address, assured him that she was fine, and refused to tell him where she was or what she was doing in case her mom got in touch with him. She blocked her mom's number. There were only a few calls from unknown numbers that turned out to be her mother, but after failing to reach Sam on those, her mom seemed to give up.

Good. That meant that Sam was truly alone. Just her on her motorcycle and the highways of America.

But she took Carly with her, sending her a postcard from each state. Even though Carly couldn't write back. Even if Sam had an address she could give to Carly, she didn't think she'd want her to. She'd blocked Carly's number. Not because she really wanted Carly out of her life, but because only having her partially in Sam's life...wasn't an option. Sam couldn't handle the constant reminder that she was gone.

Even though she couldn't stop thinking about her, anyway.

Ever since she'd begun changing, Carly had been her "pack," in as much as such a thing existed in her life. Carly, and later Spencer. It hadn't been her uncles, it hadn't been her mom and her grandma, it had been Carly, her best friend, later her lover, and always the closest thing she had to someone who felt like home.

And all of that was gone, thousands of miles away, across an ocean. In losing Carly, Sam felt like she had lost everything.

Being a true lone wolf, out on the road, was both liberating and lonely, exciting and depressing. Sam wasn't lonely because she was alone; most people were annoying and their company was not something she wanted. She was lonely because she didn't have Carly. Even Spencer or Freddie or Gibby would be a true pleasure to see, but even the three of them combined hadn't been enough of an incentive to stay in a city without Carly Shay.

But Sam explored, she drove through every state. During full moons, she only took wolfsbane if she couldn't find a safe place to run around, but she managed to have a night out at least once each full moon on her journey. She could hunt to her heart's content, fill her belly, and let the wolf's senses and instincts overtake her so that she didn't have to think about how half her heart was missing anymore.

Even as frugal as Sam knew how to be, her mom's money didn't last long (it never did). Sam was a minor, but she had a fake ID and she knew how to lie well, and sometimes took odd jobs. Or she sometimes scammed people. Or she sometimes stole. She tried to rely on things that wouldn't get her thrown in juvie in a state she didn't know well, but in the name of survival, Sam had few scruples.

And the end of her road led her right to one Cat Valentine.

Of course, at the time, she had no idea that Los Angeles was going to be the end of her road. Her thought was that maybe she would just keep riding south and see what Mexico might have to offer. She thought she spoke Spanish well enough to get by—she'd certainly do better than Carly landing in Florence probably only knowing how to say ciao and the names of like five kinds of noodles.

But when she saw the girl with the bright red hair get thrown into the back of a trash truck, she was spurred into action. And Sam Puckett didn't just throw burritos aside and chase moving vehicles just to help some stranger.

But she had for Cat, without a second thought.

Sam knew right away that Cat was special. It wasn't something rational, it wasn't something logical, it was just something that was factual that she had no idea what to do with.

She didn't know when she stepped into the apartment Cat shared with her Nona that she was walking into her new home.

She didn't know when she fell asleep on the apartment's fold-out sofa that it marked the end of a long line of nights in which she slept in a different bed, each time (even if that particular sofa was soon replaced by a different one and Sam soon after that had her very own bed).

And she didn't know when Cat joined her on that fold-out sofa bed that she would be longing for that very thing, for the warmth of her small form in bed next to Sam at night, only a few months later; and that in spite of all her practice with longing when she spent years waiting for Carly, she thought the longing for Cat might kill her.

She only knew that Cat was special. Special enough to make Sam want to toss aside her burrito and save her. She had no idea what was to come.

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[A postcard featuring a painting of an alligator and its baby in a swamp. In the background is another alligator on the shore, some tall grasses and deciduous trees, and a pale, cloudy sky. At the top in large letters it reads "Shreveport" and at the bottom in smaller letters "Louisiana."]

Didn't really consider gambling until I got here and kept seeing the signs for casinos. I'm not sure why. But with my fake ID I could get in and played a few games, made a little money. They say the trick is to know when to walk away and, well...maybe I

learned that from you, because it worked, for me, like it's probably working out great for you.

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"You and Carly?" Cat asks. She's shocked, but...not. Like the revelation that Sam is a werewolf, this one also starts to make sense as Cat considers it. She remembers the way Sam had wanted to open Carly's Christmas gift in private, the way she clearly hadn't even been expecting a Christmas gift from the person she referred to as her best friend. The wistful sadness or obvious discomfort every time Carly had come up in conversation. And as Cat considers the strange intimacies of Sam being a werewolf—the physical affection, the fact that Sam has already been *naked* in front of her—she considers how *easy* it would be for two werewolves to fall into puppy love together.

Sam nods mutely, watching Cat. She lets Cat sit with the information for a long moment before she speaks again. "Sorry I didn't tell you. I wasn't sure how. We kept it a secret, the whole time." She laughs bitterly. "I also didn't really *want* to talk about it. I'm still not sure I want to."

"You don't have to talk about it," Cat offers again. This time she thinks she successfully hides her reluctance and her curiosity out of her voice, but Sam squints at her, and seems to read it, anyway.

"No, you deserve to know." Sam repeats her rationale, then sighs and looks at her hands. "What do you want to know?" she asks.

"How'd it happen?" Cat asks.

Sam shrugs, and squints again, but she's looking off into the distance instead of at Cat. "It just kind of happened one day. I...I had a crush on Carly for a long time. She was my best friend and just about the only person I thought understood me. And during full moons I felt more drawn to her until one morning, after we changed back...we kissed."

Cat smiles. Sam's voice is wistful as she recounts the memory, and it's sweet, but also makes Cat feel melancholic. "So after that you were together?"

"Not exactly..." Sam took a breath. "Carly only felt attracted to me around the full moon. So for a long time, we were only sort of together, and only around the full moon. It wasn't even really like a relationship. We were...best friends who got the urge to kiss a *lot* every once in a while."

Cat frowns at that. Sam's voice is a little harder, a little bit bitter as she recounts this detail. "But you liked her? Like, all the time?"

"I loved her," Sam corrects, in a tone so quiet Cat has to take a second to interpret her words.

"But then...that's not fair," Cat insists. She can't understand why Sam isn't sneering at this, or rolling her eyes, or being *angry* about this, because Cat is getting angry on her behalf.

Who was Carly to say that they could only ‘be together’ during a full moon, when Sam cared so much?

“I know it’s not fair, but it’s what we had.” Sam looks at her. “The moon...it *does* affect us in weird ways. So for a while, it made total sense to me that maybe there could be something different about how we saw each other during the full moon. Or at least, how Carly saw me. And I wanted her badly enough that I almost didn’t even really care that I couldn’t have her all the time.”

“It just seems mean,” Cat mumbles grumpily, “Like she was using you.”

“She wasn’t,” Sam replies, without question. She sighs. “Look, I know how it sounds. And I’m not saying there weren’t times I wasn’t angry about it, myself. We even broke up for a time because of it. As much as you can break up with someone you aren’t dating. That’s when I tried to date Freddie. Which was awful.” Sam pulls a face, but keeps explaining. “But after that is when Carly realized she wanted more.”

Cat bites back the mean comment she wants to make and draws herself up, slightly haughty. “Well, I’m glad she finally figured it out.”

“Me, too,” Sam grins. She reaches and takes Cat’s hand. “It’s sweet that you’re mad for me, but, I’ve had a lot of time to think about this, and I’m not mad at her about it, anymore. I get it. We were so young then, and just because I figured out much earlier that I liked girls and that I liked Carly most of all, doesn’t mean that the fact that it took her longer was *wrong*. She got there. That’s the important part. And I forgive her. Besides, we both made mistakes.”

“Why? What did you do?” Cat is curious, because she thinks this is probably just Sam trying to claim the scales are even when they’re not.

“Well, I never should have tried to date Freddie, for one thing. He didn’t deserve to be my experiment, to be the thing I used to make Carly jealous. And...I should have been clearer with Carly about how I felt. Maybe if she knew, she would have realized sooner what I meant to her. Maybe she would have realized she was hurting me, a little. Not that I wasn’t the one accepting it. I would have done anything for her.”

“Sam, you...you *let* her hurt you?”

Sam scrunches up her face helplessly. “Seemed to make sense to me that love would hurt.”

Cat feels her heart twist and all at once both understands exactly what Sam means as she aches for her, and wants to prove her wrong, to be as sweet and loving and soft with Sam as she deserves, to show her that love can be those things, and more. “Sam...”

“Hey, it’s really okay, I don’t hold a grudge,” Sam insists. “We were young and stupid. Carls had to figure herself out. And when she did, well, we were together, all the time, for a year. We kept it secret, but it wasn’t so painful this time. It was more...pragmatic. And, god, we loved each other so fiercely, so fully.” She glances at Cat, perhaps worrying she’s said too much.

But this part doesn't bother Cat, so much, the idea that Sam has loved before. She's *happy* for Sam, that she got what she wanted, after suffering for so long with half-measures and the push and pull of someone who didn't know what she wanted. "Then what happened?" she asks.

Sam blinks a few times and briefly bites her lip before saying, "She moved to Italy."

"But why?" Cat asks. "You told me she lives there, but how did that happen?"

"Her dad," Sam explains. "He's in the Air Force or something and was stationed there. He invited her to come live with him, and...she said yes."

"But wasn't she happy in Seattle?"

"She was," Sam said. "But the fact that she never got to see her dad, her one remaining parent, that hurt her all the time. So the opportunity to live with him, to really get to be his daughter again, it was stronger than anything she had tying her to Seattle. As much as we loved each other, I couldn't ask her to stay. I *wanted* to, more than anything, but I knew if she stayed for me, she'd hate me for it. And I'd rather be the one to hate that she left than have her be the one hating that she stayed."

"Because you'd do anything for her," Cat echoes Sam's earlier words, feeling her own kind of wistfulness now.

Sam nodded, slowly. "She was my best friend and I loved her."

"Even though she hurt you."

"Sometimes that happens, when two people try to figure out what they mean to each other," she says significantly. Cat blushes, remembering the times she and Sam have fought, even though she's loved Sam almost from the day she met her. With a pang, she remembers Sam, pulling away after kissing her for the first time, insisting she couldn't. She winces, remembering the time she'd told Sam she didn't care *what* happened to her if she jumped her motorcycle over the tank of vicious tuna fish. It wasn't true, but it *felt* true when Cat had said it, and she knows it must've hurt Sam.

Maybe she's no better than Carly. Maybe she and Sam had made mistakes, too, tiptoeing around each other for months, not saying what they wanted, hurting each other while protecting their hearts and preserving their secrets.

She and Carly are more alike than Cat wants to admit, and not just because they both have loved Sam so deeply, and Sam has been vulnerable with them both enough that they can hurt her (because while Cat knows the depth of Sam's feelings for Carly, at least at one point, she still doesn't know if Sam loves her, the way she loves Sam).

"You're right," Cat replies quietly. She changes the subject, because she doesn't want to dwell on mistakes she made. "Is Carly the only person you've...done it with?"

Sam nods, expression still a little guarded, but she meets Cat's eyes fully now. "And you've really never done it with anyone?"

"No," Cat shakes her head. "I've dated a handful of boys, kissed a few more, but I didn't really date anybody for very long. They...usually told me they didn't understand me."

Sam frowns, "What's hard to understand about you?"

"I don't know." Cat looks at her shoes. "A lot of people think I'm weird."

Sam snorts. "Well, sure, but that's something I love about you." She puts her arm around Cat's shoulders. "Weird is good."

"Not always," Cat giggles, and she feels warm, and like she might float away, because Sam said she *loves* something about Cat. It's not quite the same thing as an *I love you*, but...it makes Cat feel giddy, all the same. She sobers, slightly. "I'm sorry I'm not ready for more yet."

"Hey, you don't have to be sorry for that," Sam's voice is like velvet, and Cat feels like she's wrapped up in it, safe and comfortable. "I got a little carried away."

"I know, and I liked it," Cat admits. "I liked it a lot. But I guess I just need a little more time. And to know that..." She wants to say *and to know that you feel the same way about me*. "To know that we have a future," she settles on.

"I sure hope we do," Sam murmurs quietly, but she doesn't offer anything else, just sits next to Cat, arm around her. She seems lost in thought again.

Thinking about the future is a little scary. Cat tries not to think about college, and how things might change between them. Even if she's not planning to go anywhere, she knows she'll be busy, and she doesn't want Sam to feel left behind. All she knows is that she wants her future to include Sam, whatever it looks like.

She leans over and presses a kiss to Sam's cheek, letting it linger, until Sam turns her face to catch her lips.

This time, they stay sitting on Cat's bed, and the kisses stay soft and sweet even as they linger, but Cat is still trembling with desire when Sam pulls away.

Sam smirks, eyes dipping to where Cat's chest is barely covered by the loose bodice of her dress. "I'll let you get changed into your pajamas," she says quietly, slipping into the bathroom to, presumably, brush her teeth.

Tonight, Cat wants Sam to join her in her bed more than ever, precisely *because* she's not sure she can control herself.

Snow

[A postcard featuring digital art of the silhouette of a bison, made up of a collage of different shapes and patterns and various shades of brown. Below the bison are the words “Oklahoma” and “Thackerville.”]

Texas is huge but also just a ton of empty space. I don’t think I’m even halfway through it but I realized I almost forgot Oklahoma so I just dipped up over the state line to grab a postcard. Sometimes I try to picture us settling down in the places I pass. I’ve gotta admit, I can’t really picture you on a ranch, no matter how well you played that idiot farmgirl.

-

Sam begins to worry slightly when she doesn’t hear from Tori right away. But she also knows that Cat has play rehearsal after school every day, and still has a boatload of homework when she gets home, so she figures Tori is in the same...loaded...boat. Still, she’s trying to decide whether Tori needs a reminder, and she’s constantly checking on the little bit of wolfsbane she has left, trying to tell herself she’ll be okay if Tori fails her. She can last another full moon. After that, though...she’s in trouble.

But on Wednesday, she finally gets a text from Tori.

Hey, it’s Tori

Oh, they were off to a great start.

Uh, yeah I know

I put your number in my phone

Right!

So my sister can drive us Friday

Right after school

Can you meet me at Hollywood Arts?

Well, Sam doesn’t have much of a choice, does she? But she doesn’t mind dipping out of her own online school a little early. She supposes it makes sense. She knows from Cat that there’s a few hours between when school lets out and when they’re expected to be back to perform the opening night of their play that evening.

Yeah sure

Okay great!

I'll see you then

It's best if you bring cash

Makes sense to Sam. She pretty much relies on cash for everything anyway. That way, no one can ever prove she was anywhere she isn't supposed to be.

Got it

See you then

On Friday, Sam parks her motorcycle in the Hollywood Arts parking lot just before students begin to stream out of the building and into the warm winter Los Angeles sunshine. She easily spots Cat, her bright red hair like a beacon, as she comes out of the school chatting with Robbie. She catches sight of Sam and Sam can see her smile broaden and her eyes light up and she hurries over to Sam to give her a big hug and a kiss.

"Hi!" she says breathlessly. "I almost forgot I'd see you here today. Except I was also looking forward to it all day."

Sam chuckles and leans in to kiss her again. "Yeah, I know what you mean. Have you seen Tori?"

"She was with Jade at her locker, she should be out soon." Robbie is the one who answers, and then smiles awkwardly, lifting his hand in a wave. "Hi. Robbie," he reminds her, pointing to himself.

"Yeah, I know who you are," Sam furrows her brow at him, and decides not to remind both him and Cat that she'd kissed him once, and so certainly should know who he is.

"Right. Yeah. We met that time when Freddie was here. And the dance," he adds as an afterthought. He frowns. "And at the party at Kenan Thompson's house."

Cat giggles, clearly a reaction to the general discomfort of the entire interaction. "Robbie, people remember you!" she assures him, "Especially when you don't have Rex."

There's a muffled voice from Robbie's backpack at that. "Hah! Not women. They only remember me," the voice brags. Even years later, Sam recognizes the voice of Robbie's puppet. She's...okay, she's pretty impressed.

Robbie, though, cringes. "Ignore him," he stage whispers to the two women. Baffled, Sam just nods slowly, though Cat frowns at Robbie's backpack, offended.

To break the awkwardness, Sam scans the crowd of students, and, fortunately, notices Tori and Jade, heading their way. "Oh, there they are," she announces casually.

Tori sees them and waves, leading Jade over to where they're standing next to Sam's motorcycle. "Hey," she greets. She side-eyes Robbie, briefly, as if to remind herself that he isn't in the loop here.

Jade turns to him, “We’ll see you tonight, Robbie?” she says pointedly, clearly dismissing him.

Robbie, however, just nods emphatically. “Of course! I may have a small role, but it’s still important!”

“Right, see you then,” Jade prompts again, words more emphatic.

There’s a pause, then Robbie says, “Oh! All right then. I’ll see you tonight,” and with an awkward nod, he begins to walk away. Sam hears a muffled “Hah!” come from his backpack as he goes.

Tori turns back to Sam. “Are you ready to go?” she asks.

“I’m here, aren’t I?” Sam replies.

Tori nods, “We’d better find my sister before she leaves without us,” she sighs, then leans over to kiss Jade’s cheek. “See you later,” she winks.

Jade rolls her eyes, but she’s smiling. Sam turns to Cat and gives her a grin, and Cat leans in for a brief kiss on the lips. “You’re watching the play tonight, right?” Cat asks.

“Of course,” Sam promises. “I’m looking forward to it.”

Cat beams at her. “I’m so excited!” she bounces happily. “Okay, have fun, you two!”

“I’ll give you a ride home, Cat,” Jade offers in a bored tone as Sam follows Tori across the parking lot.

“Oh, there she is,” Tori nods toward a brunette wearing a pair of tall, spike-heeled boots, who is standing next to an older red sporty sedan. Sam braces herself, wondering if, because they’re near a full moon, she’s about to have a reaction to meeting Tori’s sister, too.

When the girl looks up from her PearPhone, though, Sam recognizes her instantly as the busty brunette who had forced Beck to dance with her at the Valentine’s Sweetheart Dance. She considers the girl in light of this new information. There’s the *vaguest* resemblance to Tori, and Sam doesn’t feel *any* sort of werewolf energy from her. Not that that’s...really a thing.

Before Tori can offer any kind of introduction, Trina looks Sam over with a scowl. “Who are you?” she asks, blunt and baffled.

Tori sighs, “Trina, I told you we were going to be driving Sam. Cat’s girlfriend.”

Trina tilts her head to the side as she scrutinizes Sam. “Huh. Good for Cat, I guess.” Though her words seem pleasant enough, something about her tone offends Sam, a little.

“My sister, Trina.” Tori gestures at her reluctantly, as if hesitant to confirm her relationship to the girl in question.

“I figured,” Sam replies. “Uh, nice to meet you?” She figures she should at least try to be polite if Trina is doing them a favor.

“Whatever,” Trina says dismissively. “Are we going?”

Tori takes the front seat, and Sam slides into the back seat. She notices the leopard-print seat covers immediately, and reluctantly settles into place. Trina sits down, turns on the car, and begins backing out of her space with barely a glance in her rearview mirror, pulling on her seatbelt as she drives. Sam hasn’t even found her seatbelt yet, but she’s already certain she’ll need it.

“Trina!” Tori hollers. “I had barely shut my door!”

“Then move faster! I don’t have all day,” Trina snipes back.

“Oh, my god,” Tori mutters, then turns in her seat to look at Sam as well as she can. “I’m sorry about her,” she says loudly, clearly needling Trina.

“It’s fine,” Sam grumbles, still searching for her seatbelt, as Trina is already exiting the parking lot and joining traffic on Sunset.

At least Trina doesn’t merge onto the freeway, because Sam never does find her seatbelt. It seems to be tucked under the ugly leopard print seat cover, or maybe tucked under the back seat, itself. She just grips the door handle and holds on. She may ride a motorcycle everywhere, something most people consider a dangerous way to travel, but riding with Trina Vega is another experience entirely. Sam suspects it’s Trina’s werewolf senses that keep her instincts sharp enough to stay safe on the road, because she doesn’t seem to be paying much attention most of the time.

Eventually, though, Trina pulls over onto a side street in downtown LA and says, “Okay, get out.”

“Thanks for the ride,” Sam says quickly, sliding out of the backseat as soon as the car is fully stopped. Sam isn’t often accustomed to thanking people, but in this case, it feels like a survival instinct.

Tori steps out and leans into the open door to speak to her sister. “Thanks, Trina. We’ll text you wh—”

“Tori!” Trina shrieks. “Close your door, we’re holding up traffic!”

There is exactly one car behind Trina’s, but Tori hurriedly closes the passenger side door and Trina screeches away.

“Well, that was an adventure,” Sam deadpans.

Tori shudders, as if brushing off something disgusting. “I don’t know how I used to ride to school with her every day. At least that was a short ride.”

“You don’t drive?” Sam asks. She’d assumed that if Tori did, they wouldn’t have had to deal with Trina.

“No.” Tori shivers again. “I had a bad experience on my driver’s test, and...I’m not ready to retry it yet. But luckily Jade drives me most places now.” Tori is already walking down the street, and Sam follows her.

“But not here,” Sam comments.

Tori shakes her head. “No, I’d rather she not find out about this place. Jade is too curious, and I don’t know what might happen if the wolves that run this place think a human blew their cover.”

Sam grunts in reaction. She’s not sure if Tori is just being paranoid or if it’s actually likely some local werewolves would hunt down a human just for knowing about them. Tori seems like the cautious type, but then, Sam has an inkling that there might be reasons that werewolves stay so well hidden. The fact that Carly’s father is off doing top secret military work and it would almost be *impossible* for him to stay on wolfsbane without help due to the kinds of missions he’s involved in, or the fact that whenever any of Sam’s uncles or cousins are in prison, there’s always some prison guard or doctor who knows to make sure they get their wolfsbane, too. She has a feeling there are some structures in place to make sure that always happens.

But she doesn’t think that Jade and Cat are the only humans in the world who know about them, either, and she doesn’t think that the standard response would always have to be eliminating humans who know about them. Mysterious, random murders can garner attention. But Sam doesn’t like to think of all the implications inherent in this kind of conspiratorial thinking, and she doesn’t want to get Tori started on it, either.

Besides, they’re standing in front of a little, unassuming holistic shop called Earth+ wedged between an accounting firm and an antique store that advertises its hours as “By Appointment Only.” Not exactly a great location for foot traffic, but Sam figures that’s probably somewhat intentional. Beaded curtains make it difficult to see beyond the display window, which shows a shelf with some vitamins, crystals, books and potted plants on it. The store window advertises CBD and displays other signs and stickers promising quality. Sam also notices a discreet blue rose sticker on the window, one that she’s seen before, the one time she went with Spencer to the art supply store in Capitol Hill in Seattle where he bought his wolfsbane.

“This must be it,” she says quietly.

Tori nods, smiles, and guides her inside.

The inside of the shop is unremarkable, like any other holistic shop Sam has been in (her mom is always trying new vitamins and supplements, searching for a quick fix for all her issues, but now Sam wonders if that’s also where *she* buys her wolfsbane). Sam scans the shelves of vitamins, the assorted crystals and sage sticks and boring books.

There’s a man behind the counter—a werewolf, Sam assumes—who gives a friendly nod and a customer service smile as they come in. Tori leads Sam right up to the counter. “Hi, we’re

here to pick up,” she informs him.

“ID, please?” he asks.

Sam isn’t expecting this. Is she supposed to be eighteen? Maybe Tori is eighteen already and didn’t think to ask Sam. Does she need her fake ID? Tori, however, seems to be expecting this and pulls out her student ID. Sam relaxes a little, since Tori’s school ID is accepted, and shows her real Washington driver’s license.

The man barely glances at Tori’s ID but he eyes her for a moment. “New in town?” he asks, as he types briefly on his computer.

“Yeah.” Sam doesn’t offer anything else.

But he doesn’t ask anything else. Instead, he pushes some button underneath his counter. There’s an audible clicking sound, and the “Employees Only” door next to him unlocks. He gestures for them to step through.

As they step into the back room, the atmosphere changes immediately. It’s no longer a boring health and wellness and spirituality shop. The air is different, more humid, and smells of earth. It’s more brightly lit, and the decor is clean and stark, not like the worn shelves of the front of the shop. This back room itself is about the size of the entire store out front.

There are a few more people back here, but an attractive woman who can’t be more than a few years older than they are with long dark braids and a light copper complexion is the one who offers a casual smile and greets, “Hey, there. Here to pick up for your sister?” she asks Tori.

“Actually, no. I’m here with my friend Sam,” Tori gestures.

“Okay, great. Well, if you purchase today, I’ll give you a freebie for the referral.” Tori looks a little surprised at this, and the woman smiles at Sam, “So, it’s your first time with us.”

It’s not a question, but Sam clarifies anyway. “It’s kind of my first time ever. Buying for myself, I mean.”

“Oh, cool, well, welcome. I’m Astra. I manage the wolfsbane grow back here.” She gestures around her.

Sam has been kind of too focused on Astra herself to really take in much, but she looks behind her, to the far side of the room, where she can see tall plants with bluish purple flowers growing in long planters, underneath bright lights and with a sprinkler system overhead. A young man wearing gloves is carefully pruning them. The rest of the back room is mostly a lot of glass display counters, and shelves with jars full of dried leaves and flowers. The third person in the back room is a man built tall and broad, and appears to be security, though he wears nothing to designate that aside from an air of authority.

“So, let me show you what we offer and you can let me know what interests you,” Astra continues speaking, and gestures to the jars on the shelves behind her. “We have the dried

flower itself for people who are interested in deciding on their own dosages and experimenting with their own recipes.” She begins walking behind the glass counter and gesturing to what was inside. “We have capsules over here, and here’s our tinctures if you need it to be fast-acting. We also have teabags for those who prefer it hot. We have inhalers here for those with sensitive stomachs. And we have some wolfsbane baked into cookies and brownies here for those who struggle with the flavor.”

Sam stares. She’d never even known so many options existed. “Uh, I’ve only ever had...the pills,” she gestures.

Astra nods, not seeming surprised. “Most places just do the capsules and sometimes the tea bags. A lot of this stuff is more recent innovation and it definitely isn’t everywhere yet. But we can look at capsules if that’s what you’re comfortable with.” She leads them back over to the section of the glass counter with the bottles of capsules. “So, what kind of effect are you looking for?” she asks.

Sam stares. “Uh. Not being a wolf?”

Astra nods and cracks a smile. “Sure, they’ll all do that, but we’ve been developing some different strains and extraction methods that can kind of dictate how much of the wolf we let in, is the best way to put it. Like some people might be taking wolfsbane so they can go dancing, so having some of that wolf energy and spontaneity might be a good thing. Some people just want to chill at home on the couch and not move for a while.” That sounded more like Sam, but Astra continues, “Some people are chronic users, and we all know things can get rough when you keep the wolf caged up for too long, but we have some particular long-term strains that help with that.”

“They don’t really work,” Tori grimaces. “Trina is still insane.”

Astra chuckles. “Trina’s a special case,” she admits. “Some other wolves have had better results.”

“I don’t know,” Sam says, “I’m usually not looking for a particular experience, I just don’t want to change. But, uh, I guess most of the time my ideal night involves chilling on the couch at home?”

“Alright, then do you want to try the couchlock strain of capsules?” Astra suggests.

“Sure,” Sam acquiesces.

“How much do you want? I have a three-month bottle, a six month bottle...”

Sam eyes the prices as Astra gestures. They average about ten dollars per month, assuming you take it all three nights. Sam figures she might as well stock up. “Six months,” she decides.

“Great,” Astra smiles, “Since it’s your first time, I’ll also throw in a tincture for you as a freebie. Anything I can put on the Vega account?” she asks Tori.

“Might as well pick up another six month supply of the non-crazy-making capsules,” Tori sighs. “See how long they last this time.”

“And you’ll get a tincture for referring Sam, too,” Astra smiles, bagging up their selections in two little white pharmacy bags. “Anything else?”

Tori glances at Sam, whose eyes are drawn to the brownies. That can’t possibly work, can it? She also doesn’t want to bring home something like that and have Cat accidentally eat it and poison herself. Living in a werewolf household must be easier. Ultimately, Sam shakes her head. “I’m good.”

Astra informs them it’s cash only and that there’s an ATM in the main store if they need to visit it, but Sam is ready, and Tori’s family apparently has a tab. Within a few minutes, they’ve paid, the security man allows them back through the door and into the front of the store, and they’re outside, each with their own white pharmacy bag.

“Thanks for showing me this place,” Sam offers awkwardly. It feels weird, trying to remember to be so polite to Tori, but she’s making an effort. And she *is* grateful to know where to buy wolfsbane.

“Sure,” Tori smiles. “Okay, I’ll call Trina to come around and pick us up.”

They begin walking back toward the corner where they were dropped off. Sam takes in her surroundings and checks her PearPhone, making a mental note of the location of this shop, so that she can find it again in the future. Tori is frowning, because she’s trying to call her sister, but it rings through to voicemail.

Tori hangs up and calls her sister again. She shoots Sam an apologetic smile, “I’m sure she’ll answer—hi, Trina!”

Tori’s sister’s voice is so loud that Sam can hear the entire conversation, even though Tori’s phone is pressed to her ear and not at all on speakerphone. “What, Tori?” Trina drawls, sounding annoyed.

“Um, we’re all done at Earth+, we’re ready for you to pick us up,” Tori’s brow furrows, like she doesn’t understand why she has to explain this.

“Oh, I already drove home.”

“You *what*? Trina, I told you I needed a ride to the shop!”

“Yeah. And I took time out of my day and gave you a ride to the shop.” Trina sounds like she’s explaining something to a toddler, which just makes Tori visibly fume.

Tori seems to take a moment to control her fury before shouting at her sister. “But how do you expect us to get *back* if you aren’t driving us?”

“That sounds like a you problem. I did what you asked. I gave you a ride. You didn’t say anything about a ride back.”

“Well, can you come pick us up?” Tori flails her arm as she speaks, gesticulating in her agitation.

“Mmm, nah. I’m already home and Mom’s making family potpie.”

“She’s making—I’m missing—Trina!” Tori shrieks.

“Oh, I better go, I have a call coming through. Bye, Tori!”

“You do not! Who would be calling y—Trina!” Tori shouts futilely, because it’s clear Trina has already hung up. Tori lowers the phone from her ear and grips it so hard Sam is convinced it might split in half in her hand. “She left,” Tori explains needlessly.

“Yeah, I could kind of hear the whole thing.” Sam is annoyed, sure, but she’s also kind of enjoying seeing Tori get so angry with her sister, in part because it’s a new side of Tori and also because, well, it’s nice to know that Tori’s family can be infuriating, too. “I guess I won’t have to spend the ride back trying to find the seatbelt in the back seat of that car.”

Tori looks horrified, “You never found the seatbelt? Oh my god.” She groans aloud, then rants, “I can’t believe her! She is such a—” Tori breaks off, fuming.

“Grunch?” Sam suggests.

Tori laughs wildly. “That’s a *great* place to start. Yes. She’s a total fucking grunch.”

Something about Tori swearing makes Sam’s lip twitch, especially when paired with a tamer word like grunch. But she has more on her mind than berating Tori’s sister. “Okay, but how are we getting home?”

Tori sighs. “I’ll call Jade.” They’re standing on the street corner now as Tori calls her girlfriend. Jade evidently doesn’t screech into the phone like Trina does, but Sam can still hear a bit of her side of the call. She can hear Tori explaining, “Hey, so, uh…Trina dropped us off downtown and then left, can you come get us?”

Sam can hear part of Jade’s response, indicating she is still at Sam and Cat’s apartment and that it would take her a little bit of time to get across town.

Sam figures she should maybe voice another issue that she’s beginning to consider. “I’m getting pretty hungry, too,” she tells Tori, who nods.

“Okay, wait, Jade, I think Sam and I are going to grab some dinner somewhere nearby here, because I need to eat before the show tonight, too. Maybe you and Cat should eat something and then come get us? We can show up at the school early and ready.” She can hear the general tone of Jade’s response, one of agreement. “Okay, I’ll text you where we end up, just call or text when you’re close.” Tori hangs up and nods to Sam, “What should we eat?”

Sam is already a step ahead of her and is looking at what’s nearby on her PearMaps and looks affordable. “Uh, are you more in the mood for pizza, diner food, or tacos?”

They agree on tacos, and walk several blocks to the taco stand, a squat little building with an ordering window and with standing counters and a few picnic tables outside for seating under a patio roof. They take turns ordering and making trips to the salsa bar and are quickly seated together with two Mexican Joke-a-Colas in glass bottles, two chicken tacos (Tori), and five carne asada tacos (Sam).

Sam takes a bite of her first taco and groans, pleased. “Okay, maybe your sister abandoning us in the middle of the city isn’t *all* bad. If she hadn’t, I might never have met these little guys.” She pats one of her plates fondly (all five tacos couldn’t fit on one paper plate).

“Yeah, it could be worse,” Tori admits. She shakes her head. “God, she’s just—she’s the *worst*.”

Sam is curious about something that came up while they were in the wolfsbane store. “You said something about how the wolfsbane doesn’t help her?”

Tori nods, “Yeah, but I think Astra’s right, it’s Trina, not the product. Trina...is insane and she takes it all the time.”

Sam winces. “Yikes,” she comments.

“I know.” She’s pensive for a moment. “She was never really into changing,” she reveals. “When our parents used to take us running up in the mountains, she always said it was boring and she wished she could just stay home. She told our parents she was convinced that one day she started changing in the middle of school because her arm got ‘hairier’ but I think that was just an excuse to never have to change again. She’s pretty much been taking wolfsbane since she was thirteen.”

Sam shakes her head slowly. “Damn. That’s...rough.” She hesitates, because it makes her think of Spencer, and how he took wolfsbane all the time to make sure he could always keep Carly safe, and how it might have contributed to his creative spirit but probably was just the reason he was a little unhinged half the time. But she doesn’t know if she wants to spill Carly’s secret to Tori quite yet. Mostly because she doesn’t know if she wants to talk about Carly *at all*. But her own sister? That’s a safe topic. “My sister is the same way. Well, she’s not *crazy*, but...”

Tori looks interested. “You have a sister, too?”

“Yeah. My twin, Melanie. Identical, in appearance only,” she offers the answer to the next question she knows she’ll get, as well as her usual caveat.

“Oh, wow.” Tori eyes Sam with interest, as if imagining what an opposite version of herself would look like. “So she’s...”

“She’s girly and brainy and too nice,” Sam assesses her bluntly. “She’s at boarding school in Vermont, she moved across the country as soon as she could to get away from our mom.” She sees Tori look a little surprised at that. Sam has already alluded to growing up not always knowing when she might get her next meal, and though she doesn’t want to go into it fully, she wants to at least give Tori some context. “Our mom is a goddamn mess.” That’s context

enough. “So my sister moved as far away as she could to leave that part of her life behind.” Sam tries not to sound too bitter, at the fact that she was left behind.

“At least you’re both away from there now,” Tori offers, her tone light to keep from sounding too sympathetic. Sam appreciates that Tori apparently can read her well enough to know she doesn’t want pity. “But she doesn’t sound much like Trina.”

“Right, yeah, she’s not, except that she doesn’t want to be one of us, she has no interest in any of this.” Sam gestures between herself and Tori to make her point. “It probably didn’t help that our mom came to visit her for the first and only time to be there for her first change to try to teach her the joys of being a werewolf. Leaving behind the wolf is probably the same as leaving behind our mom in her eyes. I think she’s taken wolfsbane pretty much every time since she first changed.”

“Wow,” Tori comments, “And she’s just...okay?”

“She sure seems to be. I saw her on my road trip and she seemed fine. She plays like lacrosse and field hockey and stuff and that probably is an outlet for a lot of her aggression.” She considers things for a moment. “I wonder if they have those capsules that are good for long-term use over there, too?”

But Tori seems stuck on a different detail. “Road trip?”

Sam pauses. “Oh, yeah, huh, I guess you wouldn’t know about this. Uh, I left Seattle last spring and I rode around the whole country on my motorcycle before I ended up here and met Cat. I visited every state. I mean, except Alaska and Hawaii.”

“Oh, wow, that’s really cool!” Tori gushes. “I’d love to see the country.” She’s thoughtful for a moment, “So last spring...around the time you guys stopped *iCarly*?”

“Yeah,” Sam nods, looking away. It doesn’t surprise her to know that Tori had paid attention to their show—she had obviously been familiar with it when they met for the first time—but it does surprise her a little to have Tori make the connection that Carly’s departure contributed to Sam’s. “Carly moved to Italy to be with her dad. I didn’t feel like staying. So I took some money and wolfsbane from my mom and left.”

Something about that scenario, or maybe Sam’s tone, seems to alter Tori’s perspective a bit. “That must’ve been hard, though. Traveling alone like that.”

Sam shrugs. “It was fine.” Sam doesn’t want to talk much more about herself, so she switches the topic again. “What did you mean by you’d have to see how long a six month supply would last you this time?”

“Oh, yeah, the reason Trina is a special case? She takes wolfsbane *every day*.”

“*Every day*?”

Tori nods seriously. “*Every. Day.*”

“Wow.”

“I know.”

“Okay, I’ve seen some people go a little nuts from long-term use, but that explains a lot.”

“It does, but she’s also always been kind of...a freak.”

“Like Melanie. Except she’s the freak for being the normal one.”

“Trina’s anything *but* normal.” Tori’s expression is pained. “One time, she used up all the mustard in the house to give herself a ‘facial.’”

Sam is confused. “How could she possibly use *that much* mustard?”

“*Exactly.*”

“And not eat it?” Sam continues.

“...Right,” Tori adds, though with less conviction.

“Wow.” Sam wishes she had more stories about Melanie that weren’t just the two of them being kids and fighting. But then she thinks of something. “Okay, the craziest thing Melanie ever did was something I made her do. See, we have this twin pact...”

Sam tells Tori the whole story of how she’d made Melanie travel to LA to elaborately prank Cat, and watches as Tori’s expression shifts from shock to horror to amusement to sympathy at Cat’s plight. “Wow. You know, your sister seems pretty cool. And if she was willing to do that, maybe she’s not that much different from you.”

“She’s *very* different from me,” Sam insists. “But, you know. I guess I appreciate her, for who she is. No matter what happens, she’ll always be my family. Can’t really escape that when someone shares your face.”

Tori smiles wistfully. “As much as I complain about Trina, I love her, too. When it comes down to it, I have a pretty good family, and that’s not something I want to take for granted.”

Sam can’t decide how she feels about Tori acknowledging the very thing that had made Sam feel inferior and jealous when they’d previously met. But she decides to accept what Tori is saying at face value. “Yeah. You’re lucky. And I’m lucky I had Carly and Spencer.”

Tori’s expression stays soft. “That must’ve been hard, when you and Carly both left Seattle. You two were really close, weren’t you?”

Sam nods, swallowing thickly. “She was—” *my everything* “—my best friend.” But Sam doesn’t want to dwell here. “But coming here and meeting Cat...I don’t know. She’s so different from Carly, but she...it’s not that she *replaced* Carly, I just felt connected to her right away, and I hadn’t really felt that kind of thing for anybody but Carly before.”

“You trusted your instincts?” Tori guesses.

Sam hadn’t thought of it that way before, but...“Yeah, I guess I did.”

Tori smiles and takes a long sip from her soda bottle before she shares, “You know, when I first started at Hollywood Arts, Jade was really mean to me.”

Sam laughs. “Shocking.”

“I know, but, she kind of had it out for me.” Sam raises her eyebrows, curious about how egregious Jade’s behavior might have been. But Tori doesn’t specify, instead she says, “But I always tried to let it roll off my back, because I really wanted to be friends with Jade.”

“Because she’s hot?” Sam asks knowingly, smirking.

Tori appears a bit flustered at this. “I mean, well, that was probably part of it, but I wasn’t really thinking about her like that yet, not really. I was still...figuring myself out a bit. What I mean is, part of the reason I kept pushing to be Jade’s friend was because I was following *my* instinct.”

Sam tilts her head to the side. “Yeah? How so?” She kind of gets what Tori means, but she wonders how Tori experiences this kind of thing.

“I guess I...followed my nose,” Tori laughs, shaking her head at her own phrasing. “Because Jade smelled *so good* to me. I was just, like, *drawn* to her. For a while I thought my nose must be defective or that it was trying to get me killed because she would just continue being cruel and pushing me away all the while smelling so *amazing* that all I wanted to do was get closer. But then, eventually...” Tori shrugs. “She and I just *happened*. And I thought, *oh*. That must be what my nose was trying to tell me.” She smiles. “So I’m glad I followed my instincts, the way you followed yours with Cat.”

“Huh.” Sam reflects on that. “I don’t know if the way Cat smelled was what drew me to her at first. Because we met in a garbage truck.”

“You met in—*what*?”

Sam grins. She’s kind of enjoying the opportunity to tell this story because she’s never really been able to talk about it, especially not in retrospect, knowing how important Cat has become to her. “Yeah, we met because I rode into town and stopped for a burrito. Cat climbed into a trash can to rescue a kitten and I saw her get dumped into the back of a trash truck. I chased the truck and climbed in after her, she fainted, and I carried her out to safety.”

“Wow,” Tori stares. “You two literally met because you saved her life?”

“Guess so.”

Tori shakes her head slowly, expression shifting to concern, “She really ended up in a trash truck? Oh, Cat,” she sighs. “I’m glad you were around and could get her out when she fainted.”

“Me, too,” Sam agrees. “But, you know, being covered in trash meant I *couldn’t* follow my nose right away. I think I was just already drawn to her. But after we got cleaned up? Yeah. I know what you mean. Cat smells *good*.”

“She *does*,” Tori agrees emphatically, “I’ve noticed that, too.” Sam raises her eyebrows and stares at Tori, the eye contact mildly belligerent, until Tori blushes again. “Oh my god, not like that. I’m not into Cat that way. I just, she smells good! I can’t help it!”

Sam grins. “Relax. I’m not actually mad. You’re totally right. And feeling drawn to Cat that way is definitely why I ended up staying in LA instead of continuing to ride my bike around the country.”

“It’s interesting, though, that we were both so drawn to people we ended up dating, like, right away.”

“Yeah,” Sam agrees. “It might be a coincidence. I don’t know if our noses really know much more than we do. I followed my instincts before and I ended up really hurt, so...” Sam had been a child when she met Carly, and didn’t have any inkling that her sensitive nose was anything out of the ordinary, but she remembers that Carly smelled good, too. But maybe that was just her memory, filling in gaps that she can’t possibly remember well. Or maybe Carly just smelled like good food because her house always had food in it. Who knows? But Sam really doesn’t want to talk or even *think* about Carly, so she just says, “And for what it’s worth, Jade smells pretty good, too.”

“I know,” Tori grins. “It’s funny. I used to date guys before I dated Jade. It was never anything really serious, but I thought I liked them, except they just never smelled that *good* to me. It was hard, when I thought they were handsome and sweet and friendly and my nose was just like *no*. But, you know, I didn’t even know this yet when I started dating Jade, but... it turns out I’m so gay. So, maybe my nose at least knew *that* much before I did.”

Sam thinks about the moon, and Carly talking about how it had been trying to reveal her own truth to her, by making Sam irresistible to her every month. And now Tori talking about the way Jade smells, and how it made her want to be close to her... Sam wonders why it always takes so long for their rational brains to catch up to what their instincts want for them. It had taken her and Cat months of living together in the same apartment, sleeping only yards away from each other in the same bedroom, to admit how much they want each other. Part of that had been Sam herself, she knows, resisting being vulnerable with someone else again, fearing another heartbreak like she’d experienced with Carly.

But she wonders if the true curse of werewolves is having two halves that never fully form a whole, instincts that can’t be reasoned with, logical thoughts that can’t quite break through the wild desires of a wolf. They’re neither beasts with brains nor humans with a wild side. They’re both and neither and somewhere in between. They live in a human world that forces them to tamp down their savage natures, and can only set themselves free three nights a month, barely long enough to get used to being something so powerful before they’re back to living in human bodies for another three and a half weeks. But even as humans, the wolf is never fully gone, and they’re stronger, faster, with sharper senses, only invisible because the world at large doesn’t know to look for them.

It makes Sam oddly sad, as she considers how different she is from Cat, how she’ll have experiences Cat can never understand, and how she’ll never really understand how it feels for Cat, to look at her as a wolf through human eyes and see a creature that falls between dangerous predator and pet dog that is still somehow a human she adores...

She shakes the thought away, and surprises herself by asking Tori, “You ever wonder why it is we got drawn to be with humans?”

Tori tilts her head to the side. “I don’t know,” she admits. “I guess I just never thought to question love.” Sam wonders if she’ll ever *not* question love. “My parents say it happens, it’s not uncommon. The kids are human if there are babies, but it’s not like Jade is going to get me pregnant.”

“She could try,” Sam quips, making Tori bite her lip to hide a smirk. “I didn’t know how common it was, I guess.” There’s that sense, again, of how unfair it is that Tori has werewolf parents she can talk to. Sam only had Spencer, who was basically a wolfsbane-addled kid in an adult’s body. But she shakes it off easily. The inequity isn’t worth gnawing at in her mind.

“It makes sense. There are a lot more of them than there are of us.”

“Yeah, that’s true.” By now, they’re finished with their tacos and sodas and are just kind of sitting in comfortable silence. Sam is surprised by how much she’s actually enjoyed spending time with Tori this time around. Sure, they’re very different people, but her initial assessment that they’re very different werewolves feels less true. They both struggle to make sense of their wolf’s instincts in human bodies, and they both have sisters who reject the natures that they embrace.

It’s little things, tiny details, but it’s a start to building common ground.

Presently, Tori’s phone buzzes in her monstrous purse, and she digs around until she finds it and pulls it out. “Ah, okay. Jade is getting close.”

Sam nods and gathers their trash to throw away while Tori taps out a reply. They walk over toward the tiny parking lot together to wait for Jade, quiet, but not awkwardly so.

But Tori breaks the silence eventually, “So, listen,” she says abruptly. “I know it’s a school night and everything, but this Sunday I was going to go run around to make sure I get out this full moon. Would you...want to join me?”

Sam looks at her, wondering how genuine this invitation is, but Tori appears excited, pleased. “You really want me to join you?” Sam asks, a little surprised. She wonders whether this is a good idea, with their connection being so new, with the conflict that characterized their first interactions.

“Yeah!” Tori replies enthusiastically. “I haven’t really run around with anyone else in *years*, my parents pretty much leave me to my own devices, and Trina hasn’t changed in so long, and, you know, Jade hangs out with me a lot when I’m a wolf, but it’s not the same...”

“No,” Sam confesses quietly, “it’s not.” She’s still a little skeptical that this is a good idea, but, she also wants to know what it will be like.

Maybe it’s time to replace her memories of full moons with Carly, that are colored with so much longing and heartbreak, with a new kind of night with another werewolf under the full moon.

“Yeah. Let’s do it,” Sam nods.

Tori absolutely lights up. “Great! I’ll talk to Jade. We can meet somewhere and she can drive us. Cat can come, too, if she wants!”

“She’d probably love that,” Sam grins. Now she’s thinking about Cat, and how she and Jade are almost here, and she’s about to see her, and her grin doesn’t fade.

When Jade pulls into the parking lot, Cat gets out of the passenger’s seat and launches herself at Sam in a hug. Sam holds onto her, grinning into vanilla-scented hair, breathing her in.

“I missed you,” Sam whispers, just before they pull apart to slide into Jade’s backseat together.

And it’s true. She *had* missed Cat. As silly as it seems, when they’d just seen each other less than two hours ago, being with Cat makes Sam feel...too many things to name.

But she feels *right*. Sam considers what Tori had said, about how their instincts drew them to these humans who had accepted them, embraced them, and Sam decides maybe her instincts aren’t so bad, if they prompted her to save a beautiful girl from a trash compactor and then settle down in a new city for the first time in her life.

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[A postcard featuring a photograph of a line of old-fashioned cars, the entire front of them buried nose-first into the ground, at an angle. Each car is painted wild colors and covered with graffiti text. The ground is grassless dirt, the sky is an almost cloudless blue. At the bottom of the postcard in an angular script it reads, “Cadillac Ranch, Amarillo, Texas.”]

Carls,

Guess hippies made this place. Didn’t think they made much of anything, which I respect. Finally almost through Texas. Never seen so much of nothing. Also never eaten such good steak. I’m sorry I’m still not ready to talk to you directly. Maybe someday. Or maybe never. Sometimes I wish I could forget you but I know I never could. And if I keep sending you those, you won’t forget me either.

Sam

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The play that Cat is in...is weird. Sam realizes she shouldn’t be that surprised given what she’s seen of Cat’s school and assignments—the project where she had to film herself as a message for a future, for instance. And, it seems, that one weird hippie teacher whose classroom they’d used to try to pass Goomer off as a teacher is the director of the play, so, yeah, Sam shouldn’t be surprised. Tori and Jade play a husband and wife—Jade wears a short wig and a goatee and talks in a surprisingly deep voice—and Cat is their young child. The play seems to mostly revolve around Jade’s character’s obsession with creating a weather-

controlling machine, Tori's wife character's deep love for him in spite of her growing worry about his obsession, and Cat's character's retreat to a fantasy world with her imaginary friend (played by Robbie, who only appears onstage occasionally, when Cat is alone). The play ends with Jade's character successfully making it rain—with real water falling on stage (and a bunch of it splashing onto Sam, in the front row), as Jade triumphantly stands under it and shouts with masculine joy.

Sam doesn't even know what kind of feedback to give about the play when she meets up with the actors after the show, so she just tells them they did great. That much is true, at least. Sam knows good performances when she sees them—that is a skill she'd honed through years of reviewing submissions to *iCarly*; in fact, it was kind of the whole reason the webshow started to begin with. But the play itself? What a weird concept. She still can't believe people are allowed to do these kinds of things in *high school*, for *grades*.

Sam ends up seeing all three shows. Friday is planned, and on Saturday she drives Cat to Hollywood Arts that evening and figures it makes more sense to stay and watch than drive home or find something else to do nearby. By Sunday, Sam is pretty sure she'll have parts of the show memorized. She also hadn't realized right away that Sunday was a matinee show, not until she'd questioned how she and Tori would go running around after an evening play.

By the time the Sunday show is over, Sam thinks she kind of understands what Jade meant about opening and closing shows being the most interesting. Opening night had a certain *energy* to it, an anxious excitement, a nervous eagerness. The closing matinee show's energy was more intense, like a last hurrah, with confidence and assuredness behind each line and each gesture onstage. The Saturday show had been good, too, but to Sam, it isn't as memorable.

After the Sunday show, they go back to Tori's house for dinner. Sam prickles a bit when she sees the house with the large windows up in the Hollywood Hills. But then, she supposes, sure, it's nice, especially compared to the house she grew up in, but it isn't *extravagant*, especially compared to a lot of other houses she's seen in this city. She supposes it's about what she should expect for a family who can afford to send their kids to private school.

Which, she reminds herself that Cat and Jade are also *both* from such families. And that Carly had almost gone to private school. And that, *technically*, she belongs to a family that sent a child to private school. Even if that child isn't her and attends on scholarship...she knows there are still expenses associated with Melanie's schooling that their mom actually makes a decent effort to cover (or that her grandma would step in to pay for when Pam spent all her money on her most recent boyfriend).

Sam pulls her motorcycle into the driveway behind Jade's car and they all follow Tori inside. The entire bottom floor of Tori's house is open concept, so Sam can take it in right away. The two sofas, the piano, the kitchen, the dining room table, the sliding door to the patio.

And, across the room, a couple that can only be Tori's parents: her father, in the kitchen, cooking something that smells delicious and meaty, and her mother, sitting at the dining room table, with her attention on her PearPhone.

Tori's mother is the first to look up and notice them, and she offers a smile. "Oh, hi, girls," she says. Her tone is pleasant, though not overly warm.

Tori's father glances up from whatever he's focused on cooking and offers a casual "Hello, ladies." Sam notices he does a double take at her, apparently noticing her presence right away.

The other three respond in a chorus, a "Hi," from Tori, a "Hey, Holly, David," from Jade and a "Hi, Mrs. Tori's mom and dad," from Cat. Sam just stays quiet.

Tori, however, steps in and says, "Mom, Dad, this is my friend Sam. She's Cat's new girlfriend."

Cat giggles, apparently in sheer joy at the statement, and loops her arm through Sam's tighter.

"Oh, that's fun," Tori's mom, Holly, replies lightly. "Plans for the evening?"

"We're going to go to Shadow Creek Park so Sam and I can run around," Tori replies.

At this, both of Tori's parents look up with interest and take a harder look at Sam. "Ah," Tori's dad says, sounding satisfied, "I see."

"Oh, so is Sam the reason you asked us about a strange reaction to meeting a new werewolf?" Holly asks keenly. Tori just nods, and Holly smiles, then gazes back at Sam, her expression looking more curious now. "Well, hello, Sam."

"Uh, hi," Sam awkwardly nods to each of Tori's parents. She's never been great with parents. It's a miracle that Carly's father liked her at all. But he is probably the only parent to ever offer her any kind of approval.

"What's your surname, Sam?" David asks. "Maybe I know your people."

Sam sure hopes not.

"Dad, you don't have to go all cop on her," Tori groans.

"I can't help what I am," he states mildly.

Okay, now Sam *really* hopes Tori's father doesn't know anyone in her family. "You probably don't know my family. I'm not from around here and none of them live here." He's still looking at her expectantly. Sam has been taught from a young age not to talk to cops, but she also feels that if she refuses to answer, he will find out her last name, and in doing so, might find out some unsavory things about Sam herself. She decides it's safest to just answer the actual question and hope her mom never got arrested in LA. "But my last name is Puckett."

If it means anything to him, he doesn't show it, just nods once. "So you're here by yourself, huh? A real lone wolf."

"No, she has me!" Cat chirps. "We've been roommates since she got here."

“I see,” David says evenly.

“Well,” Holly says briskly, “I’m sure Tori can help you out with anything you need to know around here.”

“She already took me to buy wolfsbane,” Sam admits.

“What’s for dinner?” Tori changes the subject to ask.

David shrugs. “What are you making?” he replies. “I’ll be done in here in just a minute or so, then the kitchen is all yours.”

Sam is deeply disappointed that whatever he is making isn’t something she’ll be allowed to eat. Tori looks resigned, Jade unsurprised. On the one hand, Sam is happy that Tori’s parents aren’t stepping up and offering to be her surrogate werewolf parents, because Sam doesn’t want that, and would have bristled at the suggestion. But on the other hand, from her assumptions based on what Tori had said about her conversations with her parents, Sam had expected them to be...well, a lot more *involved*. Maybe not as overbearing as Mrs. Benson, but perhaps *too* present. It’s clear, from the brief interaction, that they care about Tori and listen to her, but that they expect her to take care of herself. At least within reason; Tori has certainly never gone *hungry*, even if her parents aren’t cooking every meal for her.

Ironically, Sam thinks she can respect this kind of parenting a lot, and it’s the kind of laissez-faire attitude that makes them the least likely to take any kind of special interest in Sam, herself.

Provided Officer David never runs a background check on her, that is.

“I’ll put in an order for some pizza,” Jade says, PearPhone already in her hand. “Meat lovers?” she confirms with Tori.

“Make sure to order enough for Sam,” Cat says significantly, primly smoothing her skirt as she takes a seat on one of the living room couches.

“How much is enough?” Jade asks uncertainly.

“One should be fine,” Sam states, flopping down next to Cat.

“One...slice?” Tori asks doubtfully, dropping casually onto the other couch.

“One pizza,” Sam corrects.

Tori nods slowly, eyebrows rising. “All right, then.”

As Jade finishes ordering their pizza and moves to sit next to Tori, Trina comes stomping down the stairs. Maybe it’s just her heavy shoes, but Sam thinks she might be the most graceless werewolf she’s ever seen. She rolls her eyes as she sees who is sitting on the living room couches. “Ugh, tell me you’re not going to be monopolizing the TV all evening and making your *girlfriend* change the channels for you.”

“As if I change the channels *for* Tori,” Jade replies snidely.

“We’re not staying,” Tori informs her coldly.

“Hi, Trina!” Cat greets pleasantly, either oblivious to or purposely ignoring the tension between the sisters.

“Hi, Cat,” Trina replies, sounding indifferent. She looks at Sam and narrows her eyes uncertainly. “Hi, Carly.”

Sam feels the shock of hearing Carly’s name like cold water being poured over her. “No,” Cat says, frowning, “That’s Sam.”

“Whatever,” Trina waves her off. “But that’s where I know you from, right? You did that webshow my sister used to watch?”

“No, you know me from driving me to downtown LA with your sister and leaving us there,” Sam recovers in time to retort.

“Well, I can’t help it if Tori doesn’t have her license like a normal teenage girl!” Trina storms dramatically into the kitchen.

“Trina, don’t needle her,” Holly says in an unconcerned voice. “Tori will handle it when she’s ready.”

“Okay, but my not being able to drive doesn’t have anything to do with the fact that Trina *abandoned* us at Earth+!” Tori argues.

“You asked me for a ride there!” Trina repeats her rationale from the day before, “You didn’t say anything about a ride back.”

“Oh, why don’t you go take another wolfsbane!” Tori snaps back.

“Maybe I will!” Trina hollers back.

“Tori, *please* don’t encourage her,” David says in a low voice.

Trina stomps toward the stairs, grumbling, “It’s not like I even *asked* for anything when I gave you a ride!”

“It’s not like I *asked* to be left there!” Tori shouts after her.

Sam looks between them. “Moments like this make me glad my sister and I haven’t lived together since we were little.” She pauses, considering. “My sister *probably* wouldn’t abandon me somewhere, though.”

An indignant huff from the top of the staircase lets Sam know that she’s been heard. Clearly, wolfsbane doesn’t dim Trina’s senses.

“Yeah, even I probably wouldn’t do that to my brother,” Jade admits. “But that’s also because he’s an idiot.”

“He’s a nice kid,” Tori frowns.

“A nice, *dumb* kid. I’m not sure how he’s related to me.”

“My brother once left me in a Mexican restaurant for three hours,” Cat reports cheerfully. They all turn to look at her with concern, and she elaborates. “But it wasn’t his fault. He thought the busser was the clown who’d stabbed him.”

“And...left you there with the dude he thought had stabbed him?” Sam is the only one who replies. Jade and Tori exchange unsettled looks, but aren’t saying anything.

“Well, he knew the clown wasn’t after *me*,” Cat explains, as if this makes any kind of sense.

They seem to collectively agree not to comment any more about Cat’s brother and his apparent mental issues. Even though Cat has certainly talked about her brother to Sam, she’s still not really sure what the whole story is there. She just knows that Cat clearly has a great deal of affection for him, but that his behavior has also caused her and her family a lot of pain and confusion.

Sam gets that. So she doesn’t push Cat to talk about it more.

Their pizza arrives before long and they all eat together. Tori’s parents disappear upstairs, Trina comes downstairs, sniffing around at the pizza, which Jade absolutely forbids her to eat. Trina rolls her eyes and claims she never wanted it anyway, and Tori eventually takes pity on her and offers her “*One* slice! You can have *one* slice!”

“Tori!” Jade roars, “She *left* you and Sam downtown!”

“I know, but...” she drops her voice, “I’d rather just feed her than have her destroy the kitchen.”

“I heard that!” Trina snaps.

“Then you know I’m right,” Tori sniffs.

By the time they finish their early pizza dinner, it’s time to head to Shadow Creek Park. The four of them pile into Jade’s car, and she drives them to the location. Sam isn’t familiar with this part of the city, and when they abruptly find themselves on a long stretch of desert road with nothing in sight, on the edge of the city, Sam can’t believe this area even exists. It feels almost *eerie* that a creepy lonely road like this is here in the desert, so close to the city.

And the park itself is even *stranger*, if that is possible. It’s empty, dilapidated. It looks utterly abandoned, though the sign designating it as *Shadow Creek Park* looks strangely new. But the small picnic pavilion, the few scattered pieces of playground equipment amidst the tumbleweeds and Joshua trees and other tough desert plant life look ancient and like they haven’t been maintained in decades.

There's also a rather conspicuous grove of deciduous trees in the middle of the park. In the light of the setting sun, Sam can see that the land beneath the surprisingly thick canopy of the trees is overgrown with shrubbery and other smaller plants, making it an area that's probably difficult to venture into if it's unfamiliar to someone.

She wonders, again, about the little pieces of information she has that tell her there may be some bigger structure to werewolf life than seems obvious, from the few werewolves Sam has met. Are there werewolves in city planning, on zoning boards, in the parks service, to set aside this little-used piece of land as a werewolf hideaway? Does Tori know about it because her cop father is in the loop when it comes to werewolves in city government?

But, if that were the case, Sam reasons, there'd probably be a lot more werewolves congregating to such a spot on the first night of the full moon. Instead, it's pretty clearly just them, with their human girlfriends. And from the sound of it, it's a place Tori is very comfortable, so Sam imagines she hasn't really been interrupted here.

Maybe it's just a creepy old park that most people forget about, and most werewolves don't consider isolated or concealed enough to be a good spot. But Sam thinks it's a great spot. Sure, it isn't the lush forests outside of Seattle, filled with evergreen trees and smelling like moss and blueberries. But it already feels safer than wandering the hiking trails on the hills above the city, which don't have a lot of cover. At least here there is overgrown shrubbery and the grove of trees for concealment.

Cat is looking around the park with interest. "Wow," she murmurs, "I forgot about this place. I haven't been here since the time you tried to scare Robbie to death and he lost his PearPhone up here," she addresses Jade, shivering a little.

Jade's mouth stretches into a sadistic smile. "Hearing him scream was worth it."

Cat frowns, "You didn't even help look for his phone."

"I had better things to do," Jade replies dismissively. "At least he *stayed* in the car," she shoots a mock glare at Tori.

"Wait," Tori narrows her eyes. "What *was* the end goal to bringing me up here with a shovel that first time?"

"Nothing," Jade says evasively.

"So, wait, Jade's the one who found this place?" Sam asks. She might have to reconsider her whole Los Angeles werewolf conspiracy theory if *that* is the case.

"I mean, it's not like I discovered it, it's on maps," Jade replies, "But, yeah, let's just say I'm the one who realized the place's creep potential for a filming location and tried out a few different scenarios on people."

"I'd never been up here," Tori reported, "But when she took me here to *apparently* try to scare *me* to death, I realized what a great place this would be to run around. And it's served me very well for like a year."

“The first time I saw Tori as a wolf was up here,” Jade says, a rare note of fondness in her voice.

“Aww!” Cat croons, “I first saw Sam at home. We’ve only ever gone to the beach together.”

“Well, this is only our second full moon without me hiding,” Sam reminds her.

“You went to the *beach*!” Tori looks shocked. “You’re braver than I am.”

“It was late,” Sam tries to defend their (admittedly bad) choice. “And I was being as careful as I could. Only one person even got close enough to get a good look at me, and he’s an acquaintance I know is harmless.”

“Still,” Tori blinks, “Oh, man. I bet the beach is great when you’re a wolf.”

“It *is*,” Sam confirms.

Tori glances up at the sky. “Okay, we should go into the woods now.”

Sam follows her gaze to the swaths of pink on the horizon. “Yeah. You’re right.”

As they walk, Sam again wonders if this is a good idea. It’s been an idle thought for the past day or so since Tori suggested the outing. She’s still getting to know Tori, after all, and Sam has only ever changed around people she knows rather well and trusts: Carly, Spencer and Cat. Well, her mother is an exception, and that had never gone well. Sam knows that changing into wolves doesn’t fundamentally change who they are as people, but...who Sam is can be occasionally pretty aggressive and stubborn. The last thing she wants is the wildness and loss of inhibition that comes with the change to bring out any kind of simmering violence between herself and Tori, even though she’s *pretty* sure they put all that to rest already, with the conversations they’ve had and the agreement to get along for Cat’s sake.

She follows Tori closely into the thicket of trees and shrubs, letting Tori guide her through the dense underbrush. Sam is comfortable in such a place, just in general, but it’s clear from Tori’s sure steps and deliberate pacing that she knows this area well. She leads Sam to a little clearing, just far enough inside the copse that Cat and Jade aren’t really visible to Sam anymore, though there’s enough fading daylight to see, and the grove isn’t large or quite thick enough for Sam to get completely lost in it.

Tori stops and looks around her. “Here is where I usually hide my clothes and stuff,” she says.

“Okay,” Sam nods, pulling off her hoodie. “Then I guess we’d better get to it, sun’s almost gone.” She pulls her t-shirt up over her head.

She sees Tori’s eyes dip to take in her chest before she seems to flush and turn away as Sam reaches to take off her bra. “Right,” she murmurs.

“What?” Sam asks, already adding her bra to the heap of clothes next to her.

“It’s just that...” Tori speaks over her shoulder, not really looking at Sam, as she takes off her blazer. “I usually don’t...change in front of people.”

Sam raises her eyebrows. “I’ve almost always changed in front of people,” she reveals, a bit incredulous.

“Really?” Tori actually looks at her for a moment before turning away again. “Who?”

“Carly, mostly. Cat, once.”

“Cat already?” Tori is surprised. “I let Jade watch me once,” she reveals. “Thankfully she hasn’t asked to see it again.”

“It’s not so bad.” Sam is still facing Tori as she takes off her pants, mostly because she finds it so funny that Tori is so uncomfortable with this. Sam had always assumed nudity is simply part of the whole experience of being a werewolf. She’d become comfortable with it very young, and she and Carly had thought little of it, except during the time they were wrestling with their attraction to each other. “Sure, it’s not very pretty,” she elaborates as she drops her jeans onto her other clothes. “But it’s cool.”

“I guess,” Tori comments awkwardly. “It was just always private in my family.”

“My family aren’t the ones who taught me to be a wolf,” Sam says quietly.

Tori is turning more toward her, clearly curious. She’s topless at this point, and Sam takes that in, a momentary appreciation, before her nonchalance about nudity kicks in. “Wait, then, who *did*?”

Sam can’t say why she feels comfortable telling Tori this now. Maybe it’s because, as she’s now taking off her underwear, she’s about to be naked in front of her. They’re about to change together, something that, although it’s very common for Sam, she also knows is intimate. Maybe because she’s met Tori’s parents now, and she has a sense for how they’ve raised Tori, and she knows now that it’s not the idyllic experience she’d assumed. Logically, maybe she should be *more* jealous of Tori, given she actually kind of respects the Vegas’ parenting style, but the fact that she now has the sense that Tori hasn’t been coddled all her life makes her respect Tori herself more. But she tells Tori, “Carly’s brother, Spencer.”

“Spenc—wait.” Tori has fully turned now, down to just her pants. “Does that mean...he and *Carly* are werewolves, too?”

“Yeah.” At this point, what does it matter if Tori knows? Carly is half a world away. She and Spencer are both a part of Sam’s past now, a part of her story, and she’s allowed to tell parts of her own story to whomever she pleases. But as Tori stares in shock, Sam gestures to her legs and prompts, “You might wanna get out of those before you get stuck in them. Don’t know that I could help you get them off as a wolf.”

Tori stutters briefly, without saying anything, before spinning to take off her pants. “Sorry, I...I’m just shocked. I ran into *both* of you at that party and I had no idea...”

“It’s not like either of us knew about you, either,” Sam replies, folding her arms and watching Tori take off her pants. “Seriously, we’re about to change in front of each other, you don’t have to be a prude,” she ribs.

“I didn’t really think we’d be doing this *in front of* each other,” Tori mumbles as she takes off her underwear and stands as naked as Sam in the clearing. She turns slightly more toward her, clearly uncertain about it.

“Where *else* would I do this?” Sam gestures around them, slightly exasperated, “Not like there are a ton of clearings for me to choose from.”

“No, you’re right.” Tori kneels and begins folding her clothes quickly. Sam glances at her own messy pile, not really caring to fold them. “Sorry, this is just new to me.”

“And I guess it’s old hat to me.” Sam decides to offer Tori a little more context. “I changed for the first time in front of Carly. We kept it hidden from Spencer for a bit, but then he found out, and it turned out he’d been giving Carly wolfsbane to keep her from changing for awhile. She had no idea she was a werewolf, too. And he was always on it himself, to make sure he was always human-formed to keep Carly safe. But after that, she and I pretty much always changed together. And Spencer taught me about wolfsbane, about spending time outside to release energy. He may not have changed for years, but he clearly knew what it was like.”

Tori glances up from folding her clothes, amusement and disbelief in her eyes. “How is it that all three of us ended up with siblings who use wolfsbane chronically?” she asks.

Sam shrugs. “I’m not sure. But Spencer was pretty weird. Though the wolfsbane probably only accounted for some of that.”

Before Tori can respond, Sam sees a shudder run through her. She feels the same sensation in her own spine at the same moment. Tori stands, all modesty apparently forgotten, and takes off her glasses, placing them in the knothole of the tree she’s kneeling next to. “It’s time,” she murmurs, voice already pitched lower, the change already starting.

“See you on the other side,” Sam replies in a husky voice.

Tori laughs softly, and Sam sees her shoulders begin to hunch forward unnaturally. Except, it’s completely natural for them, as Tori begins to lurch into her new shape.

There’s only so much paying attention to another person’s transformation possible when you have your own going on, as Sam knows, but as she often did during Carly’s early transformations (out of sheer curiosity), she pays as close attention as she can, wondering if Tori’s body changes in a different order from her own, or from Carly’s. But as the wolf’s mind and instincts begin to come to the forefront, Sam stops being able to account for such details, as they don’t matter much. What *does* matter is that Tori is a wolf with lustrous brown fur that fades into silver further down her body, a shade or two lighter than Carly’s. But despite the similarity in shade, she doesn’t *look* like Carly, though it’s impossible for Sam’s human mind to verbalize why. Nor does she smell like Carly.

But still. There's a brief moment in which Sam's human brain balks at the notion of spending time with another werewolf with dark brown fur and bronze-brown eyes who *isn't* her best friend turned lover, but Sam's wolf mind pushes those reservations aside without care, because Tori is here, and that's *exciting*.

And in fact, that's *all* that matters to Sam for a brief moment—the joy of being around Tori, another werewolf. Whatever concerns Sam had, whatever strife existed between them when they were human—that's gone now, replaced only by eagerness. And then Sam's nose reminds her that Cat and Jade are waiting for them, out in the park.

Sam jumps up eagerly, tail wagging, and Tori shakes herself off and approaches Sam. They sniff noses in greeting and then Tori yips softly and begins to bound through the underbrush, out toward the park. Sam follows in her wake.

As soon as they're out of the trees, Sam picks up her speed trying to overtake Tori, who seems oblivious until Sam shoots past her and then she barks indignantly and cuts Sam off. Sam barrels into her and they roll in a playful tumble, landing in a tussle at the feet of Jade and Cat, who watch them, bemused.

“Are they fighting?” Cat asks uncertainly.

“No, I think it's playful,” Jade replies, though she, too, doesn't sound entirely convinced.

Sam leaps to her feet, sniffing Tori's nose again as Tori gets up, and then she turns her attention to Cat, who smells *so good* and who she's *so glad* is here. She jumps up on her back legs, and Cat shrieks and giggles and tries to grab her paws, but the weight of Sam forces her back several steps, and Sam ends up on all fours again. She sits on her haunches to regard Cat, who crouches down to hug Sam around her neck. Hugging feels very different when she's a wolf, but she enjoys the chance to be close to Cat, to take in her scent. Dimly, she's aware that next to her, Jade is scratching Tori behind the ears, engaged in their own bit of affection.

Cat, however, grins mischievously when she pulls away. “I got you something,” she reveals.

Sam perks up eagerly. Is it jerky? Steak? Some kind of meat? But no, it can't be, she'd have smelled it in the car on the way here. Still, she's curious as Cat reaches into her backpack and pulls out...a long purple rubber bone.

Sam's ears droop in embarrassment, but she can't help that her tail is still wagging. Cat grins widely and wiggles the bone. “You want this?” she asks.

“Oh, my god,” Jade laughs next to her. Sam chances a glance over, which is how she notices that Tori's attention is also fixated on the bone.

Because she looks away, she almost misses the moment that Cat flings the bone like a boomerang and it spins through the air. Sam leaps up and takes off after Tori, who has already launched herself after it. Maybe it's just because Sam is more used to playing and racing with another werewolf, but she's able to trip Tori up and get to the bone first, and trots

back happily to Cat, with Tori next to her, trying to also get her teeth onto part of the bone, as if to share in the glory.

Sam drops the bone at Cat's feet. Jade comments, "Somehow, I never thought to buy something like that for Tori. Seems like it'd be hard to explain why I would keep it in my car."

"I also bought a toy gun that launches tennis balls if you want to borrow that," Cat offers.

"Oh, hell yes," Jade enthuses.

They play for a little while, Cat and Jade throwing or launching toys for them, she and Tori alternately deciding to switch which toy they pursue, just to keep things interesting. But eventually, Jade and Cat seem to get bored.

"Okay," Jade says, glancing at her PearPhone. "I guess we should get going. I still have a little bit of homework to finish for tomorrow." She side-eyes Cat for a moment. "So I hope you can entertain yourself for a little while." Sam knows the plan is for Cat to stay over at Jade's, so that she can see Sam in the morning before school.

"I'll try," Cat smiles. "Plus we have to get up early to get these two." Though Cat is agreeing with Jade, she clearly seems reluctant to leave, herself.

"I know," Jade sighs grumpily. Tori whimpers, and she rolls her eyes. "Oh, shut up. You know I don't really mind." She reaches down to scratch behind Tori's ears again, then leans over and presses a kiss to the top of her head. Tori's tail thumps joyfully and she whines softly in her throat.

And then there's Cat, actually kneeling down on the dirty desert ground in her cute little pink skirt to wrap her arms around Sam again, pressing her face into the fur at Sam's neck. Sam lifts her paw to Cat's waist and tilts her head against Cat's, the closest thing to returning the embrace that she can enact, and inhales her scent deeply, letting it wash over her, calming her, making her feel strong and powerful, but like she's safe enough that she doesn't have to worry about her own power.

"I'll miss you," Cat whispers. Sam huffs out an exhale, what she hopes sounds like a sigh, and Cat stands up.

"Okay, have a good night, you two," Jade says, waving at them as they begin to walk back to Jade's car.

Sam takes a step or two after them, abruptly feeling a flood of discomfort. Cat is *leaving*, and Sam hates that. She wants Cat to be near her, she wants to make sure she's safe, to protect her. She wants to be able to smell her, to hear her heart beating, for her to pet her. She wants *Cat*.

Sam whimpers, a pained sound, as Cat gets into Jade's car. She feels locked up, like she wants to bolt after Cat, but like she knows she shouldn't, and she's frozen, watching as Jade's car turns on and begins to pull away.

In a moment, Tori is at her shoulder, nosing at her fur, and her presence breaks Sam out of her immobility. She's able to remind herself that Cat is safe. Cat is with Jade, a human who Sam's instincts tell her is a safe person for Cat. Cat isn't in any danger in regular life, or at least, not any more danger than the average person. Cat is leaving with Jade, and Sam is here, with Tori.

And Tori is pretty interesting. Sam abruptly turns and rears up at Tori, an invitation to play, and Tori takes off in a run, inviting Sam to chase her.

And chase her Sam does.

Sam puts Cat out of her mind as she and Tori play and explore together under the full moon. It's easy to do as a wolf, though it's also true that Cat is never actually forgotten. The scent of her still lingers on Sam's fur, Sam still has the sense that her heart beats in time with Cat's, even miles away. But as a wolf, it's always much easier to focus on the immediacy of now, and Sam allows herself to get swept away into a night with Tori, and all the smells of Shadow Creek Park, the sounds of its little animals, the sight of the gorgeous luminous full moon, and the joy of play and communion with a werewolf who understands her on a primal level.

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[A postcard featuring a photograph of green and brown desert in the foreground, with tall desert spoon plants and other grasses and shrubs. In the background are the high, rocky peaks of the Organ Mountains. Cursive script across a blue sky with pink clouds reads, "New Mexico."]

New Mexico has some of the best shades of brown I've ever seen, like a thousand different flavors of gravy. I'm starting to see some landscapes that look totally different again, and it's breathtaking. Also there's a Las Vegas in this state but obviously it's very different. What could we have gotten into if we'd been of age that time we went to Vegas and weren't just there to bail out my mom? Sometimes I think a lot about what could have been for us, if things had been a little different. ~~I wonder if you think about me at all.~~

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This certainly isn't Cat's first sleepover with Jade, but it's her first one that happens on a school night. Cat knows what to expect from Jade in the mornings, but she worries she isn't quite prepared for *early* morning Jade.

Though most of their previous sleepovers occurred in Cat's old house, back when she lived with her parents, this isn't the first time she's slept in Jade's bed next to her. She knows to expect the dark sheets and bedspread, the mattress that's a little firmer than Cat prefers, the abundance of pillows, the way Jade sleeps like a rock and has zero awareness of the way she moves in her sleep. She's also prepared for the fact that Jade's TV, across the bedroom, tends to be on all night, and the flickering of it that she can see behind her eyelids is something Cat has to get used to, every time.

But during previous sleepovers, Cat would usually wake up first and would sometimes wander upstairs (Jade's house is a split-level, built into a hill, and her bedroom is in a half-basement) to talk to Jade's mom or her brother, if they were around (even before the divorce, Jade's father was somehow always working whenever Cat was over). Jade's mom usually had coffee ready, and Jade would stagger upstairs, typically at least an hour or two after Cat got up, and beeline for the coffee machine. She would grunt, growl, or snap when Cat tried to speak to her until she'd had a cup or two, and then would slowly begin to become civil. Well, civil for Jade, anyway.

This morning, however, Cat wakes up to the sound of Jade's alarm. Aww, it's a recording of Tori singing a song Cat doesn't recognize, even though Jade lets it play for a good thirty seconds or so before groaning loudly and reaching to turn off the alarm. Jade lies like a lump on the bed, and Cat sits up carefully

"Good morning," Cat tries tentatively.

Jade's answer is an extended, irritated groan. Cat decides that trying to engage in any more conversation probably isn't wise, so she gets up and slips into the bathroom next to Jade's room with her backpack so she can get ready for her day.

When she comes out, Jade's bed is made, though the job is a bit sloppy, and Jade is nowhere to be seen. Cat climbs the stairs to find Jade in the kitchen, staring at the coffee pot, watching it hiss as hot coffee drips through the grounds.

Jade glances at her with bleary eyes. Her expression looks like a glare, but Cat knows that's just how her face looks before coffee. "Done in there?" Jade rasps.

Cat is surprised to get something close to a complete sentence and nods. "Yeah. No one made coffee yet?"

"M'mom's not up yet."

"Oh." Cat guesses that makes sense. She rubs her face tiredly. *She's* not even usually up this early, not even on a regular school day. "I guess it is extra early."

Jade pulls the carafe off of the coffee machine and pours the entirety into a mug, placing it back on the warmer to catch the spitting drips of fresh coffee. She takes a long sip and sighs. "Yeah," Jade says dryly. "Tori owes me big," she grumbles, though it's an empty threat. She takes another long sip and tops up her cup with the tiny splash of coffee that's brewed through in the seconds since she poured her cup. "I'm gonna get ready. Have some coffee if you want." She takes yet another sip, eyes closing in pleasure.

"Is there breakfast?" Cat asks.

Jade gestures to a couple of cereal boxes on top of the fridge, and Cat nods. It's almost too early to really be hungry, but she eats a bowl of cereal and drinks a half a cup of her mostly-cream coffee while Jade gets ready downstairs. Jade opts for a cup of yogurt with another cup of coffee and pours the rest of the pot into a travel mug. She nods at Cat. "Ready?" she asks.

“Yeah,” Cat confirms, and they head outside to Jade’s car.

It had been dark when they woke up, but the sky is beginning to brighten, and as they wind through the Hollywood Hills, Cat can see the city laid out beneath them, can see the way the first rays of the sun catch the clouds in the sky, make the haze over the city stand out. It’s beautiful, though Jade appears unmoved by the display. Maybe she’s more used to it.

By the time they pull into Shadow Creek Park, the sun is visible on the horizon (which makes Jade curse and adjust her mirrors and her visor), Jade’s coffee is gone, and Cat eagerly bounces out of Jade’s car, scanning the park for Sam. Jade joins her a moment later, a pair of sunglasses over her eyes.

And before long, they see two shapes making their way out of the dimness within the grove of trees. Sam and Tori, fully human-shaped, walking close, occasionally bouncing with their steps, and though Cat can’t hear what they’re saying, she can hear the sounds of them chatting and laughing.

As they get closer, their attention breaks away from each other and onto their girlfriends, and Tori skips the last few steps to throw herself at Jade and offer her a kiss in greeting. Sam is a little more subdued, but the smile she gives Cat tells her just how glad she is to see her as she takes Cat in her arms.

“Hi,” Sam murmurs.

“Hi,” Cat replies, feeling her own smile tug at her cheeks. She wants to kiss Sam, but... “You didn’t eat anything last night, did you?”

Sam’s brow furrows. “Pizza?” she answers uncertainly.

Cat relaxes, then leans in to kiss her girlfriend.

It’s Jade who cuts the reunion short by reminding them, “We should get moving if we want to be on time for school.”

“*Want* is a strong word to use for school,” Sam mutters, which prompts Cat to poke her in the side. Sam wriggles away and squeezes Cat close to her so that she can’t poke her again.

They get into Jade’s car, and though Sam sits in the back with Cat, she’s sitting forward in her seat, a little, toward Tori. Cat takes in the fact that both of them are smudged with dirt and have leaves in their hair, and that both of them seem to clearly have same attention on the other.

“So...” Jade drawls, maybe picking up on the same thing Cat had noticed, “How’d it go?”

“Oh my god, it was *great*,” Tori gushes.

“Yeah it was!” Sam enthuses right back.

“Sam and I had a *blast* just, running, and chasing—”

“And sniffing and checking things out—”

“—we saw this owl that didn’t trust us at all—”

“—and there was this ditch that smelled like it *knew* things—”

“—oh, and the squirrel!”

“Oh, man, *the squirrel*.” They’re both grinning widely, Tori is turned in her seat to give Sam a significant look. When Jade and Cat are both silent, Sam shrugs, sitting back a little bit.

“You had to be there.”

“So what I’m getting is you guys sniffed everything in a four mile radius and chased a squirrel,” Jade deadpans.

Tori and Sam share a thoughtful glance. “Yeah, I guess you could put it that way,” Tori concedes. “It’s...the whole experience is hard to put into words...”

“I know. You’ve tried to tell me before,” Jade says patiently.

“It’s an entirely different experience. But we had a blast,” Sam confirms.

“It was like I finally, really got to know Sam,” Tori smiled.

“But...you couldn’t talk to her,” Cat frowns. Okay, maybe she’s a *little* jealous that Tori and Sam had this transcendent experience together under the full moon, especially with the knowledge that Sam has shared some of this with Carly previously, and they had fallen in love. She remembers her irrational fears, early on, that Sam and Tori would connect more deeply than she and Sam ever could, and it feels, in a weird way, like those fears are coming true right before her eyes.

“We couldn’t, but I know what Tori means,” Sam replies, taking Cat’s hand and offering a reassuring squeeze. “There’s almost a different language to being a werewolf. We just connected in a different way. I don’t know, it’s hard to explain.”

“I see,” Cat replies, even though she doesn’t at all, she *can’t*, it’s beyond her understanding. She hates that Sam’s attention and affection on her doesn’t feel like enough right now. She *wants* to be happy for Sam, she *wants* to be relieved that Sam and Tori have found common ground and won’t be fighting anymore, but Cat feels...lost. Left behind.

It’s a feeling she knows well, from all the moments with her friends at Hollywood Arts in which she feels like she can barely keep up with their conversations, with the classwork, to being left behind by her parents, who moved away without her, and left Cat bouncing between extended family to eventually just living with another teenage girl, a situation she knows would be completely untenable if Nona didn’t live nearby.

She tries not to let it color her happiness as they drive to Tori’s house. Sam is smiling at her, and that alone makes Cat smile back, though she’s still mulling over this strange...*jealousy*.

At Tori's house, Jade claims the cup of coffee left in the carafe but immediately begins brewing more. Tori's father is awake, finishing his breakfast at the dining room table, which seems to put Sam on edge for a moment, though he heads upstairs shortly after. Tori goes upstairs to beat Trina to the shower and get ready for school, while Sam claims the small downstairs bathroom to wash off her own night under the full moon.

Cat decides that she can be helpful and makes eggs and bacon for breakfast for the two werewolves. Jade sees her plan and helps her, though it really amounts to Jade handing her things and watching her cook, nodding her approval.

"Tori always says protein really helps during the full moon," Jade comments. "Guess they need a lot of it to change."

"Then they'll get plenty of it," Cat replies.

Sam is the first to emerge from the bathroom, toweling off her hair and sniffing. "Are you cooking?" she asks Cat, awe in her voice.

"Yeah, go sit down," Cat directs her. "Jade, get her some coffee."

Jade shoots Cat a look that suggests she should reconsider ordering Jade around in the future, but she acquiesces and pours Sam some coffee. "You take it black, right?"

"Yep," Sam confirms, "I can't believe you didn't show up with some for us."

"Tori usually buys me a Jet Brew after a night out," Jade explains.

"Did you two even get any sleep?" Cat wonders as she brings Sam a plate of eggs and bacon.

"Yeah, we curled up in the clearing by our clothes after a while." Sam squints. "I don't know what time it was, probably after midnight. Tori said this morning she usually doesn't sleep outside as a wolf when she's alone, for safety's sake, and I don't either, but we felt safe together."

Cat assumes that Sam is implying they curled up together, which...it's adorable, but it's intimate in a way that makes Cat jealous, because it's not something she's done with Sam yet. "Well, I'm glad you got a few hours of sleep at least."

"Yeah, I should be fine for the day," Sam replies through a yawn.

Tori comes downstairs not long after, delighted that Cat made her breakfast. "I don't know the last time someone made me eggs and bacon!" Tori says happily.

"I know, Cat's the best," Sam brags through her mouthful of eggs. Cat feels warm from the praise and grins at Sam, who shoots her a wink.

"Okay, but you both have to hurry so we'll make homeroom," Jade reminds them.

"Oh, Sam," Tori says, "If driving home will make you late to your own online school, you can just stay at my house. I'm sure my parents won't mind. My dad will be working and my

mom won't bother you."

Sam looks deeply uncertain, but then she shrugs. "Might be easier," she admits, though she sounds reluctant.

As if on cue, Tori's dad comes down the stairs, dressed in a collared shirt and slacks. "I'm off. Have a good day, kiddo."

Tori stops him, "Dad, Sam's going to hang out here today. She attends online school and if she has to drive back to Venice, she'll be late."

David glances at Sam but seems utterly unconcerned as he nods. "Sure. Just maybe text your mom so she knows to expect that one of your friends will be downstairs when she gets up. She had a late night."

Tori agrees, and immediately begins typing on her PearPhone as David exits through the garage. And within a few minutes, they're finished eating and Sam is sitting on Tori's couch with her PearBook and a fresh cup of coffee. Cat kisses her goodbye, just once, as Jade again tries to usher them out the door.

It's mostly a typical Monday, but Cat's mind is on Sam's newfound connection with Tori. Tori herself seems mostly normal, though she is in a *very* good mood and she beams at Cat whenever she meets her eye. But Cat wishes Sam were with her, the way Jade gets to have Tori with her, if not in every class, then between classes, stealing kisses at their lockers. But Sam is in Tori's living room, attending school, and all Cat wants is her presence, her affection, her reassurance that despite the night she had with Tori, she still wants to be with Cat.

But Cat can't have that, and she tries not to dwell on it as she struggles to pay attention during her morning classes.

During lunchtime, she walks out with Robbie, who joins her in line at the Grub Truck and is telling her about the Northridge party Rex dragged him to over the weekend. She's trying to listen, though it sounds like just about every other party Robbie has gone to with Rex, and she's also trying to decide what she wants for lunch today when she knows she's hungry, but nothing sounds good.

After a moment or so, Beck strides up to them, his expression warm, "Hey, guys."

"Hi, Beck!" Robbie greets him enthusiastically, seemingly unbothered by having his story interrupted.

Beck smiles at him a bit awkwardly. "Hey, Rob. Cat, are you getting lunch?"

"Yeah," Cat sighs, "but I don't know what yet."

"Maybe you should just go sit down at our table," Beck suggests.

Cat looks at him, confused. "But I haven't bought my lunch yet."

“I know,” Beck replies, “but there might be something there you’ll want to see.”

Okay, so maybe someone bought Cat lunch. That much seems obvious, though she still gives Beck a puzzled look as she walks past him, wondering why he’s being so cryptic about this.

But once she steps through a cluster of students who are standing by the Grub Truck waiting for a meal or a friend, she stops walking. Because there at the table, she can see the back of Sam’s head, with her wild blonde hair shining in the sun. But it *can’t* be Sam. She doesn’t go to school here.

Cat hurries over, calling “Sam!” when she gets close.

Sam turns in her seat and starts to get up, her face spreading into a broad grin as she catches sight of Cat. “Hey, there you are—*oof*,” she grunts as Cat barrels into her to wrap her in a strong hug.

But Cat is too excited to see her to linger in her arms, and pulls back almost immediately, “What are you doing here? Did you audition to come to school here?” Her eyes widen, excited at the possibility.

Sam laughs, “Nah, I don’t have that kind of money. Or that kind of talent, for that matter.” Cat opens her mouth to refute that, but Sam is already speaking before she can actually fight her on the point. “No, I was doing my classes at Tori’s house, but I was hungry, and I think I was kinda in her mom’s way. So Tori’s mom called the school and said I was Tori’s cousin and that I needed a quiet place to study and asked if I could use the library to attend my classes. They said yes. And she sent me here with twenty bucks so I bought myself a burger and got you a salad,” she gestures at the lunch table.

“You bought me lunch?” Cat is in awe.

“Yeah,” Sam laughs. “Come sit,” she invites.

Cat sits next to Sam on one of the benches at their preferred lunch table, where Tori, Jade and Andre are also already seated. Beck, presumably, is waiting in line with Robbie, which Cat thinks is nice of him.

Tori shakes her head as they sit down. “I’m sorry my mom kicked you out. I really didn’t think she’d mind,” she addresses Sam.

Sam waves a hand. “Honestly, it’s better if I’m here. It was kind of weird being there without any of you guys with me. Besides, I think she was worried I’d eat all your snacks and she didn’t want to go grocery shopping.”

“That seems like a legitimate fear,” Jade drawls with amusement.

“Yeah, I also can’t believe she gave you money,” Tori comments.

“She *definitely* didn’t want me there,” Sam replies, though she sounds strangely delighted about it. “Don’t worry about it,” she waves off Tori. “Parents never like me.”

“You know, I’m not even sure they like me much,” Jade says thoughtfully.

“They like you!” Tori insists.

“I’ve wondered the same thing, though,” Andre puts in.

“Okay, my mom *maybe* never forgave you for eating the family pot pie,” Tori concedes.

“That happened *one time*. I *still* don’t know how you all share just *one*,” Andre huffs.

“I don’t even know what he’s talking about, but I’m sure I agree,” Sam interjects.

“Thank you,” Andre replies appreciatively.

Cat feels Sam next to her on the bench like a glowing warmth, and she wraps her arm around Sam’s waist and squeezes, delighted by her presence. Just *having* her here, getting along with her friends, is enough to start to make Cat feel better.

After lunch, Sam heads to the library, and Cat heads to Sikowitz’s class, which is always one of her favorites. She’s glad she’s in a better mood now, because Sikowitz is also supposed to give them all feedback for the play they did this weekend, and Cat knows a good attitude is crucial whether his comments are positive or if he has constructive criticism.

And after school, Sam is there to give Cat a ride home on her motorcycle, and Cat wishes she could ride home with Sam every day.

But when she gets home, she finds that she hasn’t quite forgotten about her feelings from earlier in the day, especially from that morning, when it had been so clear that Sam and Tori had deeply bonded. Sam seems to notice, maybe because Cat is trying to work on homework, but keeps sighing instead.

“Hey,” Sam finally says, clicking off the TV and standing up to walk over to where Cat is working at the dining nook. “What’s wrong?”

Cat isn’t sure how to say it at first. How do you tell someone that an experience that brought them a lot of joy also made you sad? Finally, she finds a way to express it. “What if I’m too boring for you?” she asks.

Sam’s brows furrow, and she chuckles, once. “You’re not,” she replies decisively.

“But you were with Carly, and the two of you shared something special every full moon. And now you and Tori have that, too, but I’ll always be...just me. Just human me.”

“Yeah,” Sam says slowly, bumping Cat with her hip as she sits down next to her in the dining nook, prompting Cat to scoot over. “That’s how I like you.”

“But I’ll never understand what it’s like for you. I’ll never be able to—” she remembers how Sam had phrased it this morning, “speak the language of werewolves with you.”

“You don’t need to do that for me to want to be with you,” Sam says simply.

“But I don’t like that you share things with other people that I can’t give you.”

Sam shrugs. “We don’t have to share everything to still be the most important people to each other.” She looks almost like she’s realizing this as she says it, her eyes lighting up. “Think about it. Jade is the friend I get to be antisocial and watch horror movies with. You don’t want to do either of those things, but I need to do those things to feel like me. And if I made you do that with me, you’d just be miserable. But if Jade and I do them, we have a great time.”

“...Yeah,” Cat acquiesces, “that’s true.”

Sam seems to realize that maybe bringing up another example of a time Cat got jealous over Sam’s attention isn’t ideal, so she continues, “Same way you and Jade and Tori and all your school friends act and play music together or whatever else you do. I wouldn’t be able to do that stuff with you, but getting to do that is important to you. So you do that with people who aren’t me, and I’ll never really know *exactly* what that’s like.”

“Yeah,” Cat nods, accepting this as well.

“And, yeah, Tori and I had a great night together. But maybe I don’t *want* you to be a werewolf. There’s something...reassuring about being with someone when you don’t have to worry they only like you because of whatever phase the moon is in.”

Cat winces, recalling her anger at Carly after Sam told her about the way their romance began in fits and starts. “But if I was a werewolf, we could share even more.”

“Sure,” Sam shrugs. “But we don’t *need* that to connect with each other. Tori and I *did* need that. If we weren’t both werewolves I’m not sure we’d ever have figured out how to get along. But you and I, ever since we met, we’ve been having adventures together. Some of it has been hard, sometimes we’ve fought, but we’ve always figured out how to work through it, because we care about each other so much. And that matters to me. *You* matter to me. I never want to stop having adventures with you.”

It’s surprisingly vulnerable, for Sam, and Cat finds herself smiling at her words. “I feel the same way,” she says quietly.

“Good,” Sam replies, standing up. “So, I’ll tell you what. You finish your homework. And tonight I’ll try one of my new wolfsbane capsules. And I’ll be...just *me*, all night with you. So there’s absolutely nothing either of us will miss out on together.”

“Okay,” Cat agrees, grinning wider.

Cat ends up very glad that they make this agreement. Especially given how much of the evening is spent with Sam topless beneath her on the couch, Cat’s mouth and hands all over the bare skin of her torso, Sam’s rasping groans like a symphony in her ears.

Buck

[A postcard depicting a fort with high walls flying an American flag next to a covered wagon and a tepee. The sky, presumably depicting sunset, is almost the same color as the sandy ground. Text at the top reads “Bent’s Old Fort, National Historic Site,” from La Junta, CO]

I don’t know if I’ll ever get past how you hurt me. I hate to be such a baby about this, but it’s true. I may understand it, but that doesn’t mean I like it. It doesn’t mean it doesn’t hurt. You wanted to continue this from a distance but I just don’t see how we could’ve. Because I still would be hurt that you left. I don’t know. Anyway. I guess this is Colorado so far. I’ll be in the mountains again soon.

-

On the morning of the third night of the full moon, Cat is surprised when Sam wakes up at the same time as her for school. It takes some time—really, it takes some coffee—for Sam to be able to articulate why, but finally, she explains, “Pretty sure I can get away with hanging out in the library at your school again today. I think it helps me to be in an *actual* school.”

Cat beams, “Does that mean I get to see you at lunch again?”

Sam laughs, “Yeah, of course. Maybe even in the halls between classes, depending how our class schedules line up.”

Cat *loves* the idea of having Sam around with her at school. Even just knowing she’s in the same building feels *so* exciting, Cat can hardly contain her enthusiasm. “Maybe you can come with me every day!”

Sam looks pensive, seeming to consider this. “I was kinda wondering how long I could do this for. Tori’s mom was pretty demanding on the phone with the school, and she reminded them she paid to send two kids there...”

“Well,” Cat takes her hands, “you said you think it helps you to be in an actual school, right?”

“Yeah,” Sam confirms, “I’m less likely to get bored or distracted and just watch TV. And, I mean, I don’t care about school like you do, but I do want to pass high school...”

“Then just tell Tori that. I’m sure she could get her mom to say whatever you need to make sure Hollywood Arts lets you hang out there. It’s not like you’re doing anything that requires tuition.”

“That’s true,” Sam says thoughtfully. “Maybe I can threaten to hang out at Tori’s house instead. Then her mom would definitely help me.”

Cat pokes her in response. “Sam,” she chides.

“Hey, I can’t blame the woman. She probably thought she had a quiet morning with the house to herself to look forward to, and there I was.”

“But she’d help you anyway, right?” Cat speculates, “Don’t you werewolves take care of each other?”

Sam’s face twists uncertainly. “Sure, sometimes. We can be very protective of people close to us.” She regards Cat with intense blue eyes for a moment. “That’s part of why I like being at your school with you,” she says in a low voice.

Cat stomach flutters and she feigns ignorance, something she has down to an art. “Because you miss me during the day?” she faux-guesses.

“Well, yeah,” Sam grins ruefully. “But also because, *especially* during the full moon, I want to make sure I’m near you. So I can protect you if anything happens.”

“You feel protective of me?” Cat asks breathlessly, partly because it feels *so good* to say it aloud, to put words to the evidence of the depth of Sam’s feeling toward her.

“I have for a while,” Sam confesses quietly. “Haven’t you noticed?”

Cat had, when she thinks about it, but, “I thought that was just how you are.”

“Sure. When I care about someone.”

Cat thinks about how long she’s just *assumed* this is a part of Sam’s general demeanor, thinks about the times Sam would place herself between Cat and strange people, would hold her arm to keep her from getting too close to others, even the way Sam jumped into a trash truck on sight of her...though Cat knows that doesn’t mean Sam cared about her *right away*...it still feels significant.

Cat feels like she doesn’t stop glowing as they finish their breakfasts and get dressed and ready to go to school, and as she clings to Sam on the back of her motorcycle the whole way there. When Sam parks, they walk into school together hand in hand, and kiss at Cat’s locker before Sam heads toward the library and Cat goes to her homeroom.

During morning break, when Cat goes to her locker, Sam is already there, though she’s chatting with Tori. When Cat joins them, Tori grins at her excitedly, “Sam was just telling me about wanting to be here during the day. I’m sure I can get my mom to help with that!” Tori assures them.

“It would really help,” Sam replies earnestly.

“And it would be cool to have lunch with you!” Tori responds. “Plus I know Cat will be thrilled.” She smiles slyly. “You know, there’s that trapdoor from the library lounge into the janitor’s closet...”

Sam’s eyebrows rise curiously, and Cat blushes. “Maybe I’ll show it to Sam,” she replies coquettishly, “if you and Jade ever aren’t using it,” she finishes wickedly.

It's Tori's turn to blush. "We don't go in there as much as we used to," she mumbles.

"Sure," Cat drawls.

Jade approaches them, looking characteristically grumpy, "What's going on over here?"

"Jade, look!" Cat says excitedly, "Sam is here!"

"Yeah, I have eyes," Jade replies in a bored tone.

"Cat was just saying something about you and Tori and the janitor's closet?" Sam relays uncertainly.

Jade's mouth tugs a little, an involuntary grin, and her cheeks pink a bit. "I don't know what you're talking about," she says flatly.

"Sure you do!" Cat refutes automatically. Jade shoots her an intense, murderous glare. Cat frowns, "It's not like it's a secret," she mutters.

The bell rings before anyone can comment further, and Sam glances at her PearPhone. "Shit, I'd better get back for English class," she turns and hurries away.

It's nice, Cat thinks, to see her actually trying with school.

But what Tori said does stick in her mind.

Sam joins them for lunch again, though she insists that *this* time, Cat is buying them both lunch, which is pretty silly, since they basically share all the same money anyway. But Cat complies, and they enjoy another lunch all together as a group. Even Rex behaves, seeming to admire Sam, though Robbie is still a little awkward around her. Understandably so, Cat thinks.

But during afternoon break, Cat has an idea.

She slips into the janitor's closet while students mill about in the hallway, and she carefully climbs the ladder to the trapdoor, which isn't so easy to do in heels and a skirt. She hopes no one else unexpectedly comes in, or they'll be able to see right up her skirt.

She pushes the trap door up, but she can't see anything except the back of the library lounge couches. She listens, but it's quiet. "Psst," she hisses, "Sam!"

"Cat?" Sam whispers back, and in a moment, there she is, leaning over the back of one of the couches and looking down at her. "Wh—where did you come from?" she asks, astonished.

"The janitor's closet," Cat whispers back, then bats her eyes at Sam. "Come join me?"

Sam glances behind her, presumably where her computer is sitting. "I still have like five minutes left of—oh, whatever, it's not like business math is *hard*." She vaults over the back of the couch and crouches down next to Cat. "You just...climb down there?" she asks.

“Yeah,” Cat replies, already descending the ladder. Sam follows her down a moment later, and they’re standing together in the janitor’s closet.

Sam looks around, “So this is the Hollywood Arts hookup room,” she muses.

“Pretty much,” Cat confirms. “Beck and Jade made it popular years ago, but Tori and Jade are the most notorious users.”

“What *did* they do in here?” Sam smirks, curious.

“There are only rumors,” Cat replies, “that Jade continually denies.” She grabs Sam by the waist and tugs her a little closer. “Want to make some rumors of our own?” she breathes.

“Oh, yes,” Sam whispers back, pushing closer and kissing Cat eagerly.

They both ignore the bell ringing several minutes later, because Sam has Cat pushed up against the door, and assures her that she’ll hear anyone coming, and though her hand is limited in access to touching Cat through the bodice of her dress, Cat’s hands are freer, moving beneath Sam’s shirt, slipping beneath the fabric of her bra, making Sam whimper breathlessly against her shoulder.

What finally breaks them apart is Sam stiffening and pulling away, eyes alert. “Someone’s coming down the hall,” she rasps.

Cat kisses her quickly. “Better go back up to the library,” she whispers. She takes in her lipstick, all over Sam’s mouth. “And clean up a little bit,” she adds, quickly pulling a tissue out of her nearby purse.

“Thanks,” Sam takes it and moves immediately for the ladder while Cat listens at the door, glancing out the little window on the door to see if she sees anyone, giving Sam time to climb back up through the trapdoor and shoot her a wink before she closes it, then Cat steps out of the janitor’s closet on shaky legs.

But it turns out Sam is right, because she almost runs right into Robbie.

“Oh, hey!” he greets her, eyes scanning over her. Cat had been hoping to go into the bathroom and freshen up a little bit before going to her next class (her US government teacher never really minded if anyone was late), and she hadn’t really expected to run into someone who would pay much attention to her. “I was looking for you to make sure you knew it was time for class.”

“Hey, Robbie,” she replies warily, “I was just on my way to the bathroom.”

“Oh, I’ll come with you!” he says cheerfully.

“Robbie, you ca—” but Cat stops herself, because, she realizes, she doesn’t actually care which bathroom Robbie decides he feels comfortable in. “Yeah, okay,” she agrees.

They walk into the women’s room together and stand at adjacent mirrors. Cat begins touching up her makeup, and Robbie scrutinizes his own reflection. “I really think I should

wear eyeliner again,” he comments, though he sounds doubtful.

“You should! You told me you like how you look in makeup,” Cat replies.

“Yeah, but...I don’t know.”

“You should do what makes you happy,” Cat says succinctly.

Robbie is quiet for a moment, still looking at himself, smoothing his hands through his hair. “So,” he draws the word out, “things with you and Sam are pretty serious, huh?”

Cat isn’t sure how to answer that, because she knows her *feelings* are serious, but they haven’t exactly talked about their future. They kind of already live together by chance. “I guess,” she settles on.

“I think it’s really nice,” Robbie says. He sounds utterly genuine, which surprises Cat a little.

“You do?” Cat asks.

“Sure,” Robbie replies. He smiles at her, eyes meeting hers in the mirror. “I just want you to be happy, Cat. And...I might’ve accepted a long time ago that it wasn’t going to be with me.”

“Oh,” Cat utters softly. “Robbie, I...” she’s not sure what she wants to say. She just wants to acknowledge that it wasn’t all in his head. “I did really like you, once,” she admits quietly.

Robbie smiles ruefully. “I know you did. And I wish I had said or done something sooner, but I was too scared. But maybe me not being brave enough means I’m not right for you, because Sam really seems great for you, and she’s not like me at all,” he chuckles. “It worked out well for you, so, I’m happy for you.”

“Maybe it’s going to work out well for you, too,” Cat suggests.

“Maybe,” Robbie says, utterly unconvincingly. He looks momentarily shy. “You know, I kind of hoped that I might have something special with Freddie, but, I guess he wasn’t interested.”

“Really?” Cat asks, delighted by the notion. She’d always wondered if Robbie liked guys, too, but it had never come up before. “You two would’ve been adorable together.”

“That’s what I thought,” Robbie sighs. “But it’s okay,” he says gamely. “Maybe college is when I’ll blossom.”

“I think you’re already in full bloom,” Cat tells him. She’s finished touching up her makeup and smoothing her outfit, and instead of letting him refute her statement or express any disbelief, she turns to look at him. “Do I look okay?”

“You look amazing,” he assures her. “Ready to go to class now?”

“Ready,” Cat agrees, taking his offered arm and letting him escort her like a gentleman down the hall, the two of them giggling too much to take it seriously.

That night, Sam doesn't take any wolfsbane, and she and Cat enjoy a wolf night indoors, with Cat feeding Sam dinner and throwing her a tennis ball while Sam does her best not to break anything in the apartment as she charges down the hall after the little ball. Once she's expended some energy, they watch TV on the couch together for a while until bedtime.

This time, when it's time for bed, Sam doesn't jump up on her own bed. She jumps up on Cat's.

Cat is *delighted*.

She'd been careful about not letting Sam get into bed with her when they're both humans, but Sam is so *affectionate* as a wolf that Cat wants her close. Cuddling with and petting Sam as a wolf is very different from the physicality of kissing that day in the janitor's closet, a very different kind of intimacy, but it's what's available to them right now, and it's exactly what Cat wants.

Besides, there's no risk of escalation with this form of intimacy. Only warmth, and closeness, and affection.

And when Cat turns over in bed to go to sleep, Sam curls up behind her knees and falls asleep herself.

Cat wakes up once and doesn't want to move for fear of awakening Sam, and drifts back off to sleep, but when she wakes up later, it's for a different reason.

It's because she can *feel* Sam changing back, on the bed.

Cat lifts her head, watching as Sam, still apparently asleep, begins to transform back into a human, still curled up next to Cat's legs on the bed. It's only as her transformation is ending, and her fur retracts, that Sam awakens, apparently due to the sudden cold, and Cat can *see* the goosebumps all over her skin as she clutches at herself, seeming momentarily bewildered to find herself nude at Cat's feet.

And then her eyes land on Cat, who stares at her openly. She's seen Sam nude before, but... something about this feels different.

Maybe Sam feels it, too, because she shifts across the bed and leans over to kiss Cat.

Cat freezes and melts at the same time, her hands longing to touch Sam all over her naked skin, to bring her closer, to succumb to love and desire, but...she can't. She knows she's not ready.

She also knows Sam didn't brush her teeth last night, since she went to bed a wolf, and that plus her own morning breath is preventing her from deepening the kiss.

Instead, Cat pulls away, and her eyes move to take in Sam, naked and on top of her sheets, leaning over her, and Cat takes a deep breath. "If you put clothes on, you can join me in the bed," she decides. Not that they have much time before they both have to be up, but that's another reason they can't take things further. They have to get ready for school soon.

Sam leaps off of Cat like a shot and tugs on a pair of pajama pants and a t-shirt from her laundry chair, and Cat lifts the covers to invite Sam back in next to her. “Not long until your alarm goes off,” Sam notes as she snuggles close.

“I know,” Cat replies. She takes a deep breath. “I...I want this. I really do. I *love* being close to you. It’s just...”

“Just what?” Sam finally prompts, pressing a kiss to Cat’s shoulder. There’s practically no space between them in Cat’s little twin bed, and Cat is lying on her back, to keep from tangling up too much in Sam.

“I can’t...go further yet,” Cat tells her, very directly.

“I get that,” Sam says quietly. “I’ll behave if you do,” she smirks, and the glint in her eye makes Cat wonder if she’s been heard.

“I mean it,” Cat says sharply. She’s had a lot of time to think about sex, ever since she learned about it from various places (movies, kids at the school she went to before Hollywood Arts, stumbling across porn online and being both fascinated and horrified by what she saw, sex education class, youth group...) and though a lot of what she learned are things she’s actively worked on unlearning, she still has a lot of conflicting thoughts and feelings about sex. She remembers crying back when she found out Beck and Jade had sex, because she was so *scared* for them, because everything she’d learned about sex made it seem so dangerous and not at all worth the myriad of risks.

By the time Jade started dating Tori, Cat had become more curious herself, and at least understood the appeal of sex, understood that it was about something far beyond just frightening consequences. She’d done enough self-exploration by then to know that she was attracted to women just as much as men, but the prospect of anyone *wanting* something as intimate as sex from her still terrified her. So she didn’t date much, never let her short-lived boyfriends get very far with her, and bolted away from Robbie when it became clear that he might make an actual move toward her, because she worried that she wouldn’t be able to say no to him.

And now...Cat *knows* she wants sex, and she knows she wants it with Sam, but in spite of everything she’s learned about how desire is okay, and something most people experience, there’s still a part of her that worries it’s a bad idea. And so, the compromise she’s settled on, in her own mind, is that she and Sam can have sex when they’re serious about each other. When they’re in love. When Cat feels like she *can’t* have any regrets, because sex will be the best way to express the significance of their relationship, the depth of their emotion, the promise of making their best attempt to build a future together.

But she can’t let Sam know that. Not because she thinks Sam will lie to her, or manipulate her into bed, but because offering such a reward is incentive for Sam to exaggerate her own feelings without even really being aware of it.

So instead, Cat says, “I *need* to wait, and I need you to help me. I’ve never done this and if I jump into it, I’m scared it will be too much for me.”

Sam's smirk fades, and she shifts closer beneath the covers, wrapping her arms around Cat. "Hey," she murmurs, "I get it. I won't push. We'll do this at your pace."

"Promise?" Cat whispers.

"Promise." Sam kisses her cheek just as Cat's alarm goes off for school.

But as they get out of bed and get ready, Cat clarifies one thing. "But I do want to start cuddling with you at night. If that's not too, um, tempting." She blushes.

Sam's eyes rove over her body and Cat sees her throat work in a swallow. "Cat," she says softly, "you're *always* tempting."

Cat feels arousal spike all through her body, and has trouble paying attention throughout the school day, with the way Sam's words echo in her mind.

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[A postcard depicting a photograph of the Monument Rocks in front of a clear blue sky. The only text on the postcard reads "The Pyramids, Kansas."]

So I bought this postcard before I even went to see what this was, but it was pretty cool. Just these bright rocks standing out on the flat land. I know Freddie could probably talk our ears off with the science of how this happened, but I think you would just tell me what the shapes remind you of (even though you probably know the science, too). I just really miss the little things. Even when I think I'm over you.

-

It turns out that Tori manages to convince her mom to call Hollywood Arts on Sam's behalf without much of an issue. Sam isn't really surprised, because it was always really easy to get her own mother to call the school and claim Sam was sick, but it does occur to her that this is essentially the opposite of this, in that Tori's mother isn't even her own mother, and she's calling the school to *improve* Sam's chances of graduating.

It's funny, in a way, that asking a school to help provide such beneficial conditions takes more effort than calling a student in sick. But then, she also considers that it's a private school, and she's not paying tuition. But whatever Tori's mom says seems to work, and Sam just signs in at the front office and makes her way to the library after dropping off Cat every day, attends her classes online, and joins her friends for lunch.

It's becoming a routine she likes, a lot. Like her days in Seattle, it was always easier to attend school knowing she'd see Carly, and going to school with Cat has a similar effect. It's not that her classes are any more interesting or that she likes school more than she did, but being able to be close to Cat, to look at her and smell her and protect her, makes Sam feel *so good* on a primal level that it makes online school almost tolerable.

It also means she begins to get to know Cat's other friends, not just Tori and Jade, but her male friends, too.

She begins to get a sense of Andre's talent, as he clearly always has music on his mind, and seems to turn almost anything into song inspiration. She sees his warmth, his compassion, his dedication to his friends. She also begins to see the moments he starts to fray at the edges, and begins to unravel, becoming anxious and frantic, his cool, calm exterior completely gone.

Robbie has odd obsessions, though he's undeniably talented with Rex. He reminds her of Freddie, in a way: boring and nerdy on the surface, but weirder and with more useful skills than expected when you get to know him. Sam also quickly notices that he deflects from discomfort with humor, something she herself has down to an art. She doesn't like much that the two of them have more than just liking Cat in common. Though even on that front, she senses nothing but friendship between them anymore, even from Robbie's side.

Beck is the most difficult to read and get to know. At first, Sam thinks he's just boring. But she figures there *has* to be a reason he fits in with this group of odd, but talented, misfits (though, they're *not* misfits in a school like this, they're popular). And there has to be a reason he and Jade are so close.

But Sam can't quite put her finger on it. He seems to be reasonably talented in several different areas—acting, singing, modeling, playing guitar—but he doesn't appear to be *passionate* about much of anything.

But...Sam kinda knows what that's like, too. *iCarly* was just about the only thing she was *ever* passionate about, and even then she sometimes slacked on her duties. No, about the only thing that holds her attention now is Cat, herself.

She doesn't put the pieces together until one lunch in which she, Cat, Jade and Tori are sitting with just Beck. Tori reports that Andre is going to be late, as he is staying after class to talk to their songwriting teacher, and Robbie is in line at the Grub Truck. He'd lost some bet with Jade about who would get a better grade on a film analysis paper and therefore is buying Tori and Jade lunch every day that week ("I let him off easy," Jade had commented, satisfied).

"Oh, man, I'm *starving*," Tori complains, eyes straying to Sam's plate.

"Don't even think about it," Sam warns before Tori can even reach for one of her fries.

"I wasn't gonna!" Tori insists, hands raised defensively.

"Where is Robbie with our food?" Jade gripes. "He's taking forever."

Cat glances over, frowning, "Maybe he's having trouble carrying all three plates."

"You're right," Jade agrees, then turns to Beck. "Beck. Go help him."

Beck's eyebrows rise mildly. "But I'm eating."

"And Robbie needs help so that *I* can eat. Go help him!"

"But you could just—"

"Help him!" Jade shouts in a scary, intense tone that makes Cat jump a little bit.

Beck doesn't really react much to her tone, just sighs and puts his fork down. "Okay, okay." He raises his hands in surrender, a similar gesture to the one Tori had just given to Sam, and gets up from the lunch table to go get in line with Robbie.

"And make sure he remembers our condiments!" Jade shouts after him. Beck raises one hand in acknowledgement, but doesn't turn. "I swear," Jade says under her breath as she turns back to the table, "he's *such* an idiot."

Tori places a hand on Jade's back soothingly. "He'll figure it out," she reassures.

"He'll figure what out?" Cat asks.

"Nothing," Jade says, too quickly.

But suddenly, Sam is the one who figures it out. She remembers Jade's frequent comments about Robbie to Beck, remembers the distinct assurance she felt that Beck is gay when she first met him, remembers her surprise that Jade could be so close with an ex-boyfriend. Well, not if they're both queer and have moved on. "He likes Robbie, doesn't he?" Sam guesses.

Jade's face remains mostly controlled, but Tori's eyes widen, giving them both away. "What makes you say that?" Jade asks guardedly.

"You always pushing him to be near Robbie, honestly," Sam replies. "But also, just, I was pretty sure he was gay when I met him."

Tori and Jade exchange a glance, and then Tori says in a low voice. "You were right."

"Wait, really?" Cat's eyes are wide, but then her brows furrow. "Actually, that makes a lot of sense."

"*Yeah*. It really does," Jade replies dryly.

"But, wait," Cat says excitedly, her voice pitched low, "Robbie told me the other day that he likes guys, too! He got a crush on Freddie," she informs Sam.

"Eww, why?" Sam recoils, repulsed.

"Eh, I can see it," Jade says thoughtfully. Sam shoots her a betrayed look, and Jade raises her eyebrows. "What?"

"Really? None of you are surprised about Robbie?" Cat sounds offended.

"Um, *no*," Jade deadpans.

"Were we...supposed to be?" Tori asks tentatively.

"Were *you* surprised?" Sam asks Cat skeptically.

"Well, no, not really," Cat admits, but then her face brightens. "But this means Beck has a chance!"

Jade scoffs, “He has more than a chance. Robbie should be so lucky to have the hottest guy in school ask him out.”

“But...Beck hasn’t done it,” Tori sighs.

“And he shuts me down every time I try to talk to him about it,” Jade scowls.

“I think he’s a little nervous about coming out,” Tori reveals quietly. “Things are changing in the industry every day, but he doesn’t want to get stigmatized before his career even begins.”

Sam is watching Cat uncertainly. “You’re already trying to figure out how to play matchmaker, aren’t you?”

“Okay, but Beck *can’t know* I told you,” Jade hisses.

“You didn’t,” Cat says matter of factly. “Sam figured it out.” She’s thoughtful, “Maybe I can get Robbie to ask *Beck* out...”

“Good luck,” Jade mutters. “He never even got the guts to ask *you* out.” She glances over, then hisses, “They’re coming back, talk about something else.”

Tori’s eyes widen as she clearly freezes. Sam is pretty quick on her feet and is trying to think of a movie to ask Jade if she’s seen but Cat beats her to it. “One time, my brother won a boa constrictor in a poker game and he kept it in a covered pack and play, you know, like for a baby? But then one day he took it outside so it could enjoy the sun and he looked away for *just* a minute and it was *gone*.” She smiles, an eerily serene smile. “It’s probably still out there in the Hollywood Hills somewhere.”

No one has any idea what to say in response to *that*, but at least that tends to be fairly typical when Cat tells a story about her brother. Beck and Robbie return, with Robbie presenting Tori with her burger and Jade with her burrito, and Beck places Robbie’s sandwich down for him, setting it next to his own plate.

Robbie seems utterly oblivious to the silence settling over the lunch table and asks, “What’s up, guys?”

“Nothing,” Cat says, faux-casual, “I was just telling them a story about my brother.”

Luckily, before she can repeat it, Andre arrives, setting down his bag and carrying a slice of pizza on a plate. Sam watches Cat unobtrusively. She’s gazing thoughtfully at Beck and Robbie.

Sam hopes that whatever Cat is planning, it isn’t going to get messy.

It turns out that Cat *does* try to talk to Robbie about Beck. She relays the information quietly a few days later during afternoon break in the halls, when she, Tori, Jade and Sam all gather next to Tori’s and Cat’s lockers.

“He insists he could never ask Beck out,” Cat frowns. “Because he doesn’t think Beck would be interested at all.”

“Is *he* interested?” Tori asks.

“He wouldn’t really say. He just kept insisting Beck is probably straight and even if he weren’t, he wouldn’t be interested in him.”

“You didn’t tell him Beck is gay, did you?” Jade asks, eyes narrowed.

“No!” Cat looks offended. “I just said I sometimes *wondered* about him.” She sighs. “But I guess Robbie doesn’t.”

“So it’s down to Beck, then,” Jade muses.

“Are we really all trying to meddle in this?” Sam asks. “Are we sure this is a good idea?”

“You don’t have to do anything if you’re not comfortable, Sam,” Cat suggests.

“I wasn’t planning to do anything, but not because I’m uncomfortable. Because I don’t like doing stuff.”

“Look, I know Beck,” Jade says quietly, “He talks a good game, but sometimes he needs a little push to go for what he wants. Because he’s handsome and charming enough to get through life just going with the flow. That’s how he ended up dating me for so long.” She shakes her head, as if amused at her own romantic history with her gay ex-boyfriend. “So, yeah. We’re meddling. Because Beck is an idiot. But he’s also one of my best friends.”

“I think it’s sweet that you care about him so much,” Tori smiles fondly at her.

Jade rolls her eyes. “I don’t *care* about him,” she lies. “I’m just tired of seeing him mope around making moon eyes at Robbie.”

Sam has never seen behavior that even approximates this from Beck. So, yeah, she’s forced to agree with Tori that Jade is being sweet.

She decides she’ll keep her opinion to herself, though.

Evidently, though, the secret being half-out among their friend group and Cat’s attempt to take Robbie’s temperature about the situation spurs Jade to decide it’s simply time for an intervention.

It happens as school lets out on a Friday. Robbie is supposed to be getting a ride home with Andre, but Tori had texted Andre to meet her in the music room to go over a song before they left school, though this is merely a tactic to keep Robbie waiting near Andre’s locker because Tori, of course, is over at her locker with Cat and Sam, waiting for Jade to bring Beck over to the group.

Jade and Beck approach, chatting casually, but as soon as all of them are together, Jade switches on a dime from easygoing to intense.

“Listen, pretty boy,” Jade drawls, moving to corner Beck up against Tori’s locker. “This is an intervention.”

Perhaps it's the wrong tactic to take, though, because Beck frowns at her but doesn't appear concerned and states in a bored tone, "And *what* are you going to try to make me do?"

Jade seems to read his defensiveness, because she backs off, but this apparently cues Tori to step in. "Beck, if you're into Robbie, you should ask him out!" she coaxes.

Beck's eyes dart from Tori to Jade and then over to Cat and Sam. "You *told* them?" he asks, though he sounds more disappointed than angry.

"No, I figured it out, actually," Sam cuts in, mostly to keep Jade and Tori from taking undeserved blame.

He blinks, looking baffled. "*How?*"

Sam is saved from having to answer by Jade, who just says brusquely, "Not the point. Look, if Robbie likes you, he'll never get the courage to say something. So *one* of you has to take a chance..." she trails off meaningfully.

"And *I* think you'd have a *good* chance," Cat drawls, a little teasing.

Beck turns to her. "Why? Did he say something?"

"Well...not *exactly*," Cat admits.

Beck's shoulders hunch in defeat. "I don't think I'd have a chance, anyway. He likes *you*," he gestures to Cat.

"He doesn't anymore," Cat insists.

"How do you know?"

"He told me."

Beck snorts. It's a sound that almost seems too undignified to come from him. "He wouldn't be honest with you about still liking you. Especially not with how scary Sam is." He gazes at her apologetically. "No offense."

"Why would that be offensive?" Sam asks.

"Look, Beck," Jade's voice takes on a pleading quality that Sam has never heard before, "Will you *please* just do it?"

Beck is quiet and still for a long moment, just looking back at Jade. Finally, he says, almost unemotionally, "What if he says no?"

"He *won't*," Tori scoffs.

"Yeah, *look* at you!" Cat encourages.

This doesn't seem to reassure him, and Jade folds her arms and frowns. "Okay, where is this coming from? You never had any problems at all asking girls out when we'd break up before."

He gives her a patient look. "Yeah, but I never *cared* about those girls. This...would be the first time I'm actually asking someone out that I have *real* feelings for. This is the first time it's actually mattered to me if they're going to say yes or no."

"Ohh," Tori utters in realization, "you're nervous!" She turns to Jade, "*That's* why he hasn't done it!"

"That's so sweet!" Cat chirps.

Jade appears unmoved, "Okay, so, if you do this, one of two things will happen. You'll get rejected—" Beck winces at this, "—and maybe you'll actually *learn* something about what it's like to not get what you want. Or you'll get a yes. Which you probably will just like any other time you've interacted with a human with a pulse."

Beck still doesn't seem convinced, and hesitates. But Sam has had enough. She strides away from the group closer to where Robbie is waiting, just around the corner at Andre's locker. "Hey, Robbie!" she calls, beckoning him closer.

"Oh, hi, I'm waiting for Andre—oh, you all are over here!"

"Robbie, what do you think about Beck?" Sam asks bluntly.

"Sam—" Beck starts, before he seems to quickly decide that it's better to stay quiet.

"Beck?" Robbie asks, turning to look at him. "You're one of my best friends!" he gushes, "You're always so...cool and calm, and you know things I don't, and just, I just think you're really neat," he seems to realize he's being a bit effusive and trails off.

Sam folds her arms and looks at Beck. "Does that sound like someone who's going to reject you?" she asks.

"Reject him? For what?" Robbie asks, bewildered.

Beck is utterly expressionless as he stares at Sam, then his gaze flicks over to Robbie. "Would you want to, um, get dinner with me sometime this weekend?"

"Would I want to have dinner with you?" Robbie repeats, in a tone that suggests it's foolish to even ask. "*Of course!* You just name the time!"

"Why don't I give you a ride home and we can talk about it?" Beck suggests.

"Well, okay!" Robbie agrees, and falls into step beside Beck as they walk away. Beck glances over his shoulder and raises his eyebrows and smiles, a tiny gesture of victory, before turning away.

"Do you think Robbie even realizes he just got asked on a date?" Tori asks tentatively.

“Eh, they’ll figure it out,” Jade waves her hand. She eyes Sam appraisingly, “Good move. I didn’t think you cared enough to be involved.”

“I don’t. It was just getting annoying to watch,” Sam replies.

Andre approaches them. “Oh, hey, there you are, Tori, I was waiting for you. Have you seen Robbie? He’s probably wondering where I am.”

“He’s getting a ride home with Beck!” Cat informs him cheerfully.

But Andre is looking down the hall and nods slowly. “I can see that,” he drawls, then looks sharply over at the girls. “Did it finally happen?” he asks animatedly.

Jade cocks her head to the side. “Wait, *you* knew?” She shoots a glare at Tori.

“I told him nothing,” Tori holds her hands up.

“Of course I knew!” Andre crows. “All Robbie ever talks about is how great Beck is, and Beck is always soft on him.” He shakes his head. “I’ve been waiting for this for a long time.”

“Why didn’t you say something?” Jade asks.

Andre shakes his head, “I don’t mess with people’s relationships.”

Jade’s head tilts, “Wait, did Beck come out to you, too? He never told me he’d told you.”

“He didn’t have to tell me,” Andre shrugs. “I knew.”

“For *how long*?”

Another shrug. “I don’t know. A long time.”

Jade fumes, maybe wondering if Andre knew that Beck was gay even back when he was dating Jade. Tori just looks awed. Cat is the one who finally wraps Andre in a hug and says, “You’re a really good friend!”

Andre laughs and hugs her back. “I’m just happy when my friends are happy.”

“Happy to let a friend live a lie, but okay,” Jade mutters under her breath. Sam is pretty certain Andre doesn’t hear it, but she does.

Tori clearly does, too, because she elbows Jade in the ribs.

Hunter's

[A postcard featuring digital art depicting reddish brown rock formations, with a prominent arch featured in the background, against a blue, cloudy sky. In the foreground, some silhouettes of hikers stand on rocks observing the distant arch. Text reads "Visit Angel Arch" at the top and "Canyonlands National Park" at the bottom, from Utah]

I've seen so many amazing things on this journey, but as I'm coming through the southwest, with its insane rocks, I just feel so small, and like I can't quite make sense of how big the world actually is. Maybe it's supposed to make you think but it just makes me uncomfortable. As much as I like adventure I guess I've always just wanted to be in a place where I know what to expect. I thought I had that with you. ~~I thought a lot of things about you.~~

Sam

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By the next week, it's official: Beck and Robbie are dating. Cat is *so happy* for them both. Beck is actually *smiling* more, a noticeable shift from his typical stoicism, and Robbie at first seems like he can't believe his luck, and confides in Cat that he feels like he might wake up at any moment. But quickly, Cat sees that Robbie's confidence grows, and he becomes bold enough to wear his male makeup to school when Beck says he likes how it looks on him. Rex also spends a little more time in Robbie's backpack than on his hand.

Cat knows it's too early to tell how strong a new relationship might be, but already she sees a difference in Beck's demeanor compared to when he was dating Jade. He's more attentive, kinder, and Robbie certainly gives him plenty of attention. Cat remembers the times Beck and Jade seemed to purposely needle each other, and wonders if part of that was an attempt by a closeted Beck to spark passion between them, to force a connection he couldn't access otherwise.

With Robbie, there doesn't seem to be a need to fight in order to ensure the other has their attention.

The new relationship barely makes waves through the student body, though Cat marvels at how different it feels to see such open affection between men on a daily basis. Not that Beck and Robbie are the only queer guys at school, but they're certainly the most popular ones.

But as the next full moon approaches, Cat almost forgets to pay attention to it, because Sikowitz has prepared a very exciting event for his acting students: One-Person Shows. A local theater owes him a favor, and so the one-person shows are to even be performed outside of school, in a *real* Los Angeles theater.

It's a very exciting prospect for the non-shrugging students in Sikowitz's class, since class participation had played a large role in Sikowitz's decision of who to offer theater space to.

So, basically, Cat and her friends, plus a smattering of some other students in Sikowitz's other acting classes would be performing one-person shows over a span of three weeks.

Cat is scheduled to perform her one-woman show on a Monday, and it isn't until Sam says something that she realizes it's right before the full moon. Luckily, neither Jade nor Tori are scheduled during any nights of the full moon, so Tori and Sam plan to go to Shadow Creek Park on that Tuesday to run around together, and Cat intends to stay over with Jade again.

But Cat can't even look forward to this as she plots out her one-woman show. She and her friends only know the vaguest details of each other's performances; Sikowitz is working with them privately, one on one, keeping their work hidden until it's time to take the stage. She knows Andre is working on something that has to do with his great-grandfather's advice for how to live to be one hundred years old, Beck is performing a very dramatic piece about the pain of being closeted, Robbie's is a tribute to Andy Samburg, Jade is performing a show that seems straightforward but has an undercurrent of psychological torment meant to convince the audience that they are being haunted, and Tori's has something to do with Wonder Woman solving world peace.

Cat excitedly decides to create Baberaham Lincoln, a female version of the sixteenth president. It's meant to be a little ludicrous—she intends to still wear a full beard even if she's playing a woman, for instance—and she's hoping to make a statement about gendered expectations and also to show how little the average high school student actually *knows* about what Lincoln accomplished. Because she really only knows the basics even though she knows they've studied the Civil War several times in school.

Sikowitz seems a little puzzled by her choice but ultimately approves of her one-woman show concept. Cat is excited to craft the beats of her comedic performance, embody the character, and to have Nona help her with a costume. Cat knows she's very good at costumes by herself, but wants Nona's help, because she likes spending time with her grandmother.

But before Cat can perform, she has a weekend to get through.

On Saturday, she and Sam are invited to a birthday party at Bots for Otis, a boy they sometimes babysit. Cat thinks it's nice that Otis likes them enough to invite them. Sam points out that he'd also invited Nona, too, since she used to babysit him, and Dice, just from getting to know him around Sam and Cat's apartment, so they're not that special, but Cat still appreciates being invited. Sam says what she appreciates is the free food, especially birthday cake, but Cat is pretty sure that Sam likes being included more than she lets on.

But it turns out that the party is an absolute dud because all the children are playing some mobile game on their PearPhones and not paying attention to the hired entertainer or even to each other.

It's annoying and a bit strange, but Cat has no idea how this simple phone game is about to impact her life.

Sunday rolls around, and Sam is attempting to fix their front door. Apparently, she'd locked herself out and kicked it in to get inside while Cat was at Elderly Acres that morning visiting Nona. Like the door to the closet that she'd broken through to stop Cat from trying to

perform the tuna jump, Sam insists on handling her own repairs so as not to get the landlord involved. Cat thinks this is probably wise. They probably wouldn't be regarded as very good tenants if he knows how often they break things around here. Or, well, *Sam* breaks things.

But while Sam cleans up her own mess with the broken front door, Cat gathers her costume pieces and her laundry to take to Nona. But when Sam hears laundry, she perks up. Cat knows she hates using the communal laundry room in the apartment complex; she's liable to forget about her clothes and she hates jostling with other tenants for time in the dryer. Truthfully, Cat doesn't like it much, either, which is why she asks Nona to wash her clothes as often as possible. Plus, she knows Nona will fold her clothes nicely if she washes them, and really, the likelihood that Sam will actually fold her own clothes before they wrinkle in a pile on her laundry chair seems slim. So when Sam asks Cat if she can take some laundry to Nona, too, Cat readily agrees.

It takes Sam some time to gather her clothes into a big trash bag; she has more than will fit in her laundry basket. Apparently, one major downside of Sam attending school with Cat is that she loses her best window of time to use the communal washing machine, during the day when most people are at work, so her laundry has piled up a bit. Cat wonders just how long it's going to take Nona to wash all their clothes and figures they should hurry over there.

But before they can leave, they're interrupted by Dice, who has overnight become addicted to playing that silly Brain Crush game on his phone.

He wanders into their apartment, doesn't appear to react to anything they say to him, but reacts *strongly* when Sam takes his phone away from him. He also admits to having walked through a carwash on his way here. Cat thinks he's probably lucky he didn't get run over.

When Dice recommends the game, Cat is honestly curious. He seems really into it, and it sounds like it must be fun.

But Sam stops her immediately. "No! Listen. People get addicted to that game and it could happen to you."

She sounds very serious. Cat wonders if she's seen this happen to someone other than Dice. "Then what?" Cat asks, wondering if Sam will share.

Sam doesn't reveal who, specifically, she's seen get addicted to a video game before, but she does lay out a very specific set of events that again makes Cat certain she's seen the effects of this before. "And then your grades at school start to go downhill," Sam intones seriously. "And then you forget to bathe. And then you lose all your friends. And then you can't even feel anything anymore."

It sounds dire. Cat looks at her in awe.

But Sam's not finished. "See this?" she asks. She picks up a throw pillow from the couch and whacks Dice over the head with it.

Dice doesn't react at all, just keeps playing his game.

Well. Cat is no stranger to addiction. She didn't kick Bibble (finally, after that last experience with the evil British children in which a Bibble-related prank almost destroyed her friendship with Sam) for nothing.

So Cat isn't going to pick this game up. Sam has convinced her.

Sam has to finish fixing the front door so they can lock it on their way out, and as she does so, Cat notices Dice's phone battery is about to die.

Dice loses his mind about the prospect of being cut off from his game and sprints out of the apartment, slamming their door behind him.

Onto Sam's fingers.

The scream that comes out of her is unlike anything Cat has ever heard.

After Cat helps Sam free her fingers, she hisses through her teeth, clearly trying to breathe through the pain. "Sam," Cat murmurs in horror. "That looks really bad." Indeed, her fingers have deep bruised indentations in them from the doorframe and are red and swollen.

"Unh-hunm," Sam manages through her shaky breathing.

"We should get you to the hospital!"

"No!" Sam says sharply.

"Sam," Cat pleads, "You need to see a doctor! What if you broke your bones? I don't want your fingers to fall off! I want you to be able to touch me!" she rambles, feeling a little teary at the prospect of however long Sam will need to recover from this injury.

"No," Sam manages, "Still paying for the last time they looked at me after the tuna fish disaster. Not getting another medical bill."

"But we can't just *leave* your hands that way!"

"We can," Sam manages. She takes a few deep breaths, then speaks a little more evenly.

"Two nights from now when I change, it'll heal my hands."

Cat blinks, "*Really?*"

"Yeah," Sam confirms, "The shapeshifting process...wounds don't carry over."

"Wow," Cat is astonished. "That's...useful."

"Yeah," Sam agrees, dryly. "So for now, we've just gotta wrap these up so I don't forget about my injury and try to use 'em."

Cat thinks she must be turning a little green at the thought of Sam accidentally trying to pick something up with her swollen, possibly broken, fingers.

Because of this, she's maybe a little bit overzealous wrapping Sam's hands up in medical tape. Sam's hands are basically useless balls by the time she's finished but at least Cat is pretty sure the layers of tape will dull any pain Sam could feel through them.

Their plans are further derailed when they go to Elderly Acres only to discover that Nona, too, has become addicted to Brain Crush. As well as all of the other elderlies.

Well, nothing good could come of sticking around Elderly Acres, where everyone from the elderlies to the orderlies quickly begin to remind Cat of the zombies in those horrifying movies Jade used to try to make her watch. She and Sam make their escape, and Cat realizes she'll have to put together her own costume. Which is fine. She can do that.

She'd just wanted Nona to be part of it, to be able to take a piece of her grandmother with her onstage.

She supposes this also means she'll have to do her own laundry. And maybe Sam's.

That's the worst part of all.

But by the next evening after school, Cat has completed her costume. She's also fed Sam a few meals, helped her undress for the shower (though Sam had insisted on washing herself; Cat isn't sure how she'd accomplished that, but she'd had to rebandage her hands when she was finished), helped Sam dress, changed channels on the TV for Sam...Cat doesn't *mind* doing any of these things for Sam. She likes to make sure Sam feels well cared for. It's just that along with going to school (Sam had stayed home) and handling everything else, it's kind of a lot. On top of that, Cat isn't sure how Sam managed to take care of herself alone that day at home, but she does notice that Sam is actually getting pretty good at performing certain maneuvers with her bandage-ball hands. Maybe she has an advantage because she has wolf hands a few nights a month, which certainly have a different range of motion from human hands.

But once her costume is finished, Cat needs to head to the theater. Since Sam can't drive her motorcycle, Nona is supposed to take them, and the only way to get Nona (and Dice, who is coming to watch) moving is to steal her phone. Which Cat does.

Cat can't tell if Sam is just frustrated about her hands, but she does *not* seem thrilled about Cat's performance. She'd been unimpressed with her costume (a black skirt and jacket with a pink bowtie, a black stovepipe hat with a pink ribbon, and black heeled boots, along with a bushy red beard to match her hair. It's silly, it deconstructs gender, it makes a *statement*. But Sam implies that Cat doesn't want to know what she thinks of it.

Well, Cat at least knows that Sam had enjoyed her performance in the play at school, so even if she's too grumpy to get anything out of her one-woman show, Cat can at least take comfort in that.

It's about the only thing she can take comfort in, at first.

Sam comes to see her backstage as she's touching up her hair and makeup and preparing to go on. She complains about how difficult it is to use the bathroom with her hands bandaged

and worries that the sounds coming from the next door karate studio will distract Cat while she's acting. Even though she's still grouchy, Cat appreciates that she clearly cares about Cat being able to have this opportunity.

The stage manager lets Cat know that they're ready for her, and Sam springs to her feet and excitedly asks Cat if she's ready to perform her "dumb little play."

Cat doesn't take it personally. Sam's eager smile tells her how she really feels more than her words.

But then she notices that Sam's zipper is down. She points it out, and Sam gestures helplessly with her bandaged hands, asking how Cat expects her to work a zipper. Which...of course. Sam had spent the previous evening and most of today in sweatpants, which she had apparently learned to manage with her bandaged hands, but how could she maneuver a zipper?

So Cat steps into her personal space, hands on her hips. She smiles at Sam, who stares back, jaw going a little slack, as Cat moves one hand slowly from Sam's hip to find her zipper, and slowly zips Sam's pants back up.

"Better?" Cat murmurs.

"Uh, yeah," Sam says quietly, eyes scanning all over Cat's face.

"I'm going to go out there now," Cat says just as softly.

"Break a leg," Sam replies.

Cat waits backstage long enough for Sam to take her seat, and then begins her one-woman show, playing "Hail to the Chief" on her little pink boombox as she takes the stage (an intentional choice, since she wants to be in charge of her own music cues rather than coordinating with stage crew).

But as Cat begins to try to set the scene for her depiction of the life of Baberaham Lincoln, it's clear that Sam is literally the only person in the audience paying attention. The house lights are bright enough for her to be able to see that *every single other person* is glued to their phone.

Her jokes fail to land, eliciting only forced laughter from Sam, her pyrotechnics don't even draw the eyes of her audience. It's *frustrating*. Cat worked really hard on her story, her special effects, her entire staging of this bizarre character.

It gets to the point that Sam even yells at the audience that they're missing the show that they're ostensibly here to see, and Cat even shouts at the audience herself. No response. Even Nona and Dice aren't paying attention. And *where* are Cat's school friends? They'd promised to be here.

She and Sam even have a whole dialogue with Cat onstage, about what she could do to get the audience's attention, but all that yields is a kid telling her to shut up because they're all

busy playing Brain Crush.

It's too much for Cat. She runs offstage crying, hearing Sam yelling at the audience as she leaves.

Sam comes to check on her, and Cat cries on her shoulder, lamenting how hard she worked, how she'd let Abraham Lincoln down, how she might as well leave.

"You're not leaving," Sam says fiercely, "You're going to go out there and finish your terrible play!"

At this point Cat wonders if Sam has a point about her play. But she can't even know for sure because she can't even make her audience pay attention. Sam starts to complain that normally she'd take all their phones away but she can't do that with bandaged hands, when an idea seems to strike her, and she orders Cat to wait in her dressing room and fix her makeup and disappears.

What follows is a spectacle of just how deep Sam's affection for Cat runs.

All Sam has done so far is complain about how ridiculous Cat's play is, but suddenly here she is, shouting commands in Japanese, with an entire karate studio's worth of kids serving as the surrogates for her own bandaged hands, knocking people's phone's away, sometimes knocking the people themselves over in their enthusiasm to remove the distractions that kept an entire audience from giving Cat their full attention.

Maybe Sam has never said she loves Cat, but Cat is starting to feel it, all the same. Even though Sam still calls her one-woman show "the worst play that anyone's ever seen" as she encourages Cat to go onstage and finish the performance.

"Pay attention!" Sam shouts at the audience as she sits back down. They obey, clearly intimidated.

And as Cat restarts her performance, she sees her Hollywood Arts friends quietly creep into the theater, taking the last seats in the back row.

Cat gets to perform her one-woman show in front of an attentive audience. And when they're actually *paying attention*, they laugh at her jokes, they gasp at her effects, and though Cat is certain many of them don't understand what kind of statement she's trying to make about Abraham Lincoln (were he a lady), she's thrilled that she gets to turn her vision into a reality and have it accepted.

After the show, she excitedly hugs Sam, and then the two of them approach her school friends. "Where *were* you guys?" Cat asks them.

"Yeah, what took you so long, I could've used an extra couple pairs of hands," Sam gripes.

Andre stares at her hands, "What happened?"

"Doesn't matter," Sam brushes him off.

“We got caught up in traffic from an accident on the 101,” Tori groans, “We got here as fast as we could.”

“Well,” Cat asks eagerly, “What did you think?”

Andre narrows his eyes, “It was, um...”

“I thought it was interesting!” Tori says.

Jade looks askance at both of them, “Seriously? That’s all you two have?”

“I don’t hear you piping up,” Beck comments, though his tone is mild enough to take the sting out of his words.

“You guys can be honest with Cat, she can take it,” Sam encourages, still sounding as grouchy as ever.

“I was being honest!” Tori protests.

“Baberaham Lincoln is hot!” is Rex’s contribution.

Jade groans. “You’re all the worst,” she says, “Tori, interesting is an insult. Beck, way to accuse me of something you’re doing, too. Andre and Robbie, really, no words? Rex, shut up.” She levels on Cat, “Your farcical performance was undeniably weird, your costume was bizarrely brilliant, your sets and effects were cool, and even though I’m still trying to figure out just *what* statement you were trying to make, it was weird enough to keep my attention, so. I guess I liked it.”

Cat grins, “You get it!”

“How is interesting an insult?” Tori protests. “I liked it too!”

Everyone follows with their own assurances that they, too, liked Cat’s one-woman show. Cat is pretty sure they’re just jumping on Jade’s bandwagon, but she’ll take it.

“Good character work,” Beck praises.

“Solid use of music,” Andre agrees.

“Your costume is amazing!” Tori gushes.

“You’re such a strong performer!” Robbie adds.

Except Sam, who remains quiet, arms awkwardly folded. Cat turns to her. “Well?”

Sam shrugs. “I already told you what I think,” she says.

Cat shakes her head sadly, “You just don’t understand satire.”

“I...what?” Sam looks offended and a little confused, but she doesn’t have another retort.

Since it's a school night, nobody lingers too long, and they all head home shortly thereafter. Now that Nona and Dice are no longer addicted to their games, they're apologetic, and can't even fathom their previous behavior. After they all lament the effect that so much screentime has on people and their ability to socialize, they all sit down together to watch Toilet Wars.

Cat thinks it's the perfect end to a challenging, but ultimately meaningful, day.

But really, the end of the day is more like snuggling with Sam in bed. Which isn't the easiest thing in the world as she struggles to put her big bandaged hands somewhere comfortable, but they make it work.

"Did you really hate my play?" Cat asks as they're in bed together.

Sam sighs. "No, you did great. I just hate my hands."

"That's what I thought," Cat replies, satisfied.

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[A postcard featuring a digital representation of the Grand Canyon, with enormous rocks and ledges of various hues of red and brown reaching into a pale sky. At the bottom of the rocks, kayakers on the Colorado River are depicted. The top of the postcard in a bold, clear font reads, "Grand Canyon National Park" from Arizona.]

Carly,

Well, I did it. I saw the Grand Canyon. It's so huge I can hardly make sense of it, like, it looks like a backdrop. You can get like right up to the edge of it, too. You'd probably hate that part, actually, but like I said, none of it really looks real. But I guess I'm glad I saw it? If I've learned anything it's that everywhere you go in this country there's something cool to see and something good to eat.

Sam

-

Okay, Cat's play isn't the *worst* thing Sam has ever seen (she's suffered through far too many *iCarly* "talent" submissions), even though she'd described it as such. It just also wasn't that interesting to her. But that was also probably because she was in such a bad mood, because Sam could easily see that so much of what Cat put into the show—her own quirky humor, her talent with costumes, her feminine spin on such a masculine figure—gave the performance a particular *flavor* that she guesses is what Cat was going for. She just didn't understand *why*. It bothers her, a little, what Cat said about her not understanding satire because *she doesn't understand what kind of satire Cat had intended*.

Because Sam knows satire. Half of *iCarly* was satire of some form or another. She just isn't sure what Baberham Lincoln was satirizing.

But anyway, she doesn't have to worry about it now. She just has to get through one more day before she can change and finally use her hands again.

She stays home from school again on Tuesday. Cat had even set up her computer for her to attend her online classes, but it's too hard to do anything without the use of her hands, so Sam just stays in pajamas and watches TV that day instead.

What used to be her idea of an ideal day at home while Cat is at school is quickly becoming something disappointing. She'd almost rather be in the Hollywood Arts library, close to Cat, knowing they're in the same building together, and able to eat lunch with Cat and their friends. Instead, she has to try to navigate her contacts list on her phone with her foot to call for a pizza, which she then has to basically bury her face in to eat, like she's a wolf.

All in all, it's not ideal. Maybe going to the doctor and having some actual medical services applied to her hands would have been better than spending almost three days with softballs for hands. But it's too late now.

Jade drives them to Shadow Creek Park that night, and on the way there, she meets Sam's eyes in the rearview mirror. "So what *really* happened to your hands?" she asks.

"Dice slammed the door on them," Sam replies. "They're pretty messed up."

"They really are," Cat shivers.

"And you're just...living like that?" Jade asks.

"Til the full moon tonight heals them," Sam replies.

Jade glances at Tori. "It *heals* you?" she asks incredulously.

"Well, I know it heals little things. It was always nice when I'd change back without a pimple or something," she explains. "I didn't know it applied to *big* things like bones."

Truthfully, Sam doesn't know for sure, either, because she mostly knows from the experience of fighting with her mother in wolf form, and minor things like what Tori mentions. But her mom had told her the transformation could heal wounds, and though she probably shouldn't trust anything her mom told her, she assumes the same processes that mend flesh can reknit bone. If her bones are even broken. Honestly, they probably aren't, just horribly bruised. She hopes.

As Jade parks, and they start toward the forest, she's surprised when Cat joins her, "I'll come help you undress," she chirps.

Tori looks uncertainly at Cat's cute heels. "Are you sure? The undergrowth is pretty dense in there."

"Yeah, babe, you probably shouldn't go in," Sam says in concern. "I'm pretty comfortable in forests and even last time I really had to watch my step."

Cat frowns, "But then how are you supposed to undress?" she asks Sam.

By now, Jade has joined them. "What's the problem?" she asks.

Cat turns to Jade, “Sam has to be able to undress in order to change and she can’t do that with her hands like that!”

“I’ll be fine,” Sam lies, not wanting Cat to worry.

“If she needs any help, I’ll help her,” Tori assures Cat.

“But that would mean you’d have to see Sam—” she stops. “Oh, you’ve already seen Sam naked.”

Jade’s brows constrict, as if she either hadn’t considered this detail or, more likely, had purposely avoided thinking about it. She scans Sam’s body, eyes lingering on her hands, “Yeah, okay,” she drawls. “Tori, strip Sam. And soon. Sun’s almost set.”

“You don’t have to order me, I’m doing it *as a friend*,” Tori says, bumping Sam’s arm as she turns around and they begin heading into the grove of trees.

“So, you’re going to strip me as a friend, huh?” Sam asks, amused.

Tori groans, “This is awkward enough, don’t make it weirder.”

“It’s fine,” Sam assures.

Sam is able to get her shirt off, but she does need Tori to unhook her bra and unzip her pants. It’s the polar opposite of the moment in the dressing room the night before when Cat had zipped Sam’s pants for her, and Sam had barely been able to keep from kissing her and putting her mouth all over her, right there in that little theater. Honestly, the reasons she hadn’t included her useless hands, not wanting to ruin Cat’s stage makeup, and the fact that her Baberham Lincoln beard isn’t exactly an aphrodisiac.

But with Tori, it’s a little awkward, but there’s no thrill, no spark, as her hands move so close to Sam’s intimate areas. It feels as mundane as if Tori is tucking a tag in on her shirt. Except that Sam cuts all the tags out of her shirts, they’re too itchy.

For both of their sakes, Sam manages to pull down her own pants and underwear while Tori undresses, and then she looks down at her bandaged hands.

“You know, as cool as it would probably be to watch my claws burst out of these, I’m kinda worried these bandages won’t fully come off when I change. Maybe we should take ‘em off now.”

“On it,” Tori replies. She can’t find the end of the medical tape, but she does find a sharp stick and cuts the tape, beginning to unravel it. “Damn, this is a lot,” she comments as she tugs yards and yards of medical tape off of Sam’s hands.

“Yeah, Cat kinda went overboard,” Sam admits. It’s absurd, if she thinks about it, the way they’re both standing nude in a forest and Tori is pulling at the medical tape like it’s some kind of magician’s trick. “Hurry up,” Sam comments, glancing toward what she can see of the sky, trying to gauge how much time they have left.

“I’m trying!” Tori replies. “I’ll start the next one so at least if I don’t finish them both you’ll have less to deal with.”

“Fine,” Sam agrees, thrusting her other hand at Tori.

Tori does manage to remove all the tape, and just in time, but before they change, she looks in horror at Sam’s hands. “Oh my god,” she murmurs. They’re purple with bruises, and still swollen, but Sam can move them, a little. They don’t have much feeling in them but she thinks that’s more from how long they’ve been wrapped up than anything else.

“They’ll be fine,” Sam assures her, hoping strongly that she’s right.

Tori nods, though she looks worried and a little sick. But moments later, her eyes seem to gleam golden for a moment, and her lips stretch into a feral grin. “Here we go,” she murmurs.

“About time,” Sam grumbles, staring at her painful hands. In mere moments, she feels her shoulders begin to hunch as she begins to tip forward onto her hands. She preemptively winces, anticipating the agony she’ll experience as her injured hands make contact with the ground, still not transformed into paws, but the anesthetizing effect of transformation must already be in effect, because Sam only feels the echo of any sort of pain, like lifeless sparks reverberating up her arms, and then nothing but the numb ache in the bones of her hands as they turn into paws in front of her eyes.

She and Tori complete their transformations only moments later, and while Tori shakes herself off, Sam lifts one front paw, then the other, testing the weight, the strength of her paws, making sure they seem healed. They feel entirely normal, and Sam breathes out through her nose in a huff of delight.

Tori steps over, ears perked, head tilted as she seems to regard Sam’s paws for a moment, but evidently, she seems satisfied by what she sees, so she reaches out to tap Sam’s paw and then dances away, inviting Sam to chase her.

And Sam does, chasing her out of the forest and into the park, yipping with joy, reveling in the power of her wolf’s body, of her healed hands, of feeling again like she is her whole self, capable of protecting Cat’s heart, capable of fighting for her, should the need arise.

She and Tori bound back to their human lovers, romping through the park, with its dry ground and patches of brittle desert groundcovers and grasses, whatever landscaping the park had invested in clearly not maintained. Jade and Cat greet them happily, petting them, and Sam feels her own tail thump the ground in time with Tori’s as they enjoy the affection.

They take some time to all play together, Cat and Jade throw toys for them, until the two humans seem to decide that they’ve had enough and say goodbye, preparing to head to Jade’s to spend the night again. And, just like last month, Sam *doesn’t want* Cat to leave, even though she knows she must, but she accepts it better this time. There’s even an odd sense of *relief* as Cat leaves, something that Sam’s human mind can’t make sense of.

But maybe her wolf’s brain is already processing something that neither side of her could quite make sense of yet.

She and Tori prepare to have a night to themselves with the bestial denizens of Shadow Creek Park. They explore the edges of the park, starting in a different direction from last time, both wondering what they might have missed, what else there might be to explore.

But as she and Tori chase a jackrabbit back to its burrow under some dense shrubbery, forcing them to abandon the pursuit, Sam stops abruptly, alarmed and alert.

It takes Tori a moment to notice her reaction, and she turns, trotting back toward Sam curiously, ears rotating, as if trying to listen for what has caught Sam's attention.

But the reality of what is happening takes a moment to sink in for Sam, herself, as it dawns on her that she stopped running because *she can smell her mother*.

And with that comes a creeping sense that something is very, *very* wrong.

Sam whines in her throat, softly.

The smell is very faint, and Sam has a sense of what direction it's coming from. She knows, too, that it's very likely her mother can smell her, too, that it's the only logical reason why her mother would even *be* here to begin with.

It's not a pleasant thought. No encounter with Pam Puckett when they're both wolves goes well.

Tori approaches her cautiously, nosing at Sam's jaw, trying to offer comfort. Sam wishes she could verbalize what she knows, but all she can do is whimper and whine and let her body language tell Tori enough: that they might be in danger, that they should be worried.

Sam can't decide whether to hide or run or simply meet her fate when a breeze carries another whiff of scent, stronger now. It's certainly Pam, and she's closer.

Sam bolts, away from Shadow Creek Park, away from their safe space, but then stops. Would it do any good to be further from their clothes, from where they're going to be picked up tomorrow? Her mother can probably smell her clothes, too, will easily be able to deduce that this is where Sam will have to return in the morning. Sam stops, indecisive, with Tori beside her, looking at her with dark amber eyes, pupils wide with alarm. Sam wonders if she smells another werewolf yet, even if she doesn't know, *couldn't possibly* know, who it is.

She decides to hurry back toward Shadow Creek Park. Maybe if they stay in their grove of trees, Pam won't want to go in after them. It's not exactly a fortress, but it's a deterrent, a dark space with rough terrain that is unfamiliar to Pam but not to Tori and Sam.

Tori follows her, and the two of them make their way to their clearing. Sam can smell that her mother is closer. It won't be long now. She's certainly scented them, will certainly find them. She's here for Sam, and Sam knows she won't leave until she finds her.

For now, Sam is in the copse in Shadow Creek Park, next to her clothes, tail between her legs, ears perked for any sound, nose inhaling a plethora of different smells, filling Sam's mind with information, with certainty.

Tori is with her, posture tense, but her tail is stiff and held out, maybe projecting confidence for Sam's sake. She seems *very* aware that a werewolf is coming for them, and aware of Sam's reaction, but Sam knows she's relying on instinct and guesswork.

And after what feels like hours of waiting, feeling only dread, but is more likely only a few minutes, Sam can hear a harsh bark coming from out in the park. It makes her skin crawl.

She doesn't move.

She listens, and finally hears the quiet sounds of paws, moving around outside the trees, but not coming inside. After a few moments, Pam howls.

The sound is loud and Sam is honestly afraid she'll attract attention. It may *feel* deserted up here in Shadow Creek Park, but Sam knows the entire city of Los Angeles is just over a rise barely tall enough to block the city lights from easy view.

So when Pam barks again, a sound more like a snarl this time, Sam knows she can't wait this out any longer.

She turns to Tori and bares her teeth, a warning to *stay there*, then makes her way out of the trees to meet her mother in Shadow Creek Park, hearing Tori's soft whine of concern follow her.

And Sam steps out to face Pam, standing only a few yards away from her on the dry ground, head raised, tail raised, posture domineering, powerful.

Sam tries to stand tall, but her tail lowers on sight, her ears flattening. She *hates* that she's afraid of her mother, but she *is*. The last thing she'd done before leaving Seattle was to steal from her mother and skip town without a word to her. It isn't like she expects this to be a happy reunion.

It almost never is, with the two of them.

She stares at the werewolf in front of her, whose fur is more sandy to her golden hues, who is bigger, broader than she is, built strong. Not that Sam is a weakling, but whether it's just her mother's posture or her build, there's no denying who should win in a fight.

Sam hopes it doesn't come to that.

Pam approaches her, still maintaining her own display of power, and Sam wills herself to stand tall, not to cower. She bares her teeth as her mother gets close, growling in her chest, trying to stop her from getting any closer.

It doesn't work.

Pam ignores Sam, even as she snaps her teeth in warning, until abruptly she feigns left and then lunges, trying to knock Sam over.

Sam manages to keep her balance, barely, and dances away, growling and snapping more, ears flat, hackles raised, trying to stand taller than her mother, to make her mother back

down.

Pam doesn't, and another lunge comes, and Sam feels her claws as Pam tries to wrestle her to the ground, but Sam wriggles away, returning with her own lunge, barely missing sinking her teeth into her mother's flank.

They're in another stand-off, neither of them yielding, bodies poised, primed for another fight, neither backing down, just staring at each other, growling and snapping their teeth.

This time, when Pam strikes, Sam feels teeth in her forelimb.

She also knows Pam hasn't bitten her *hard*, not as hard as she could have, but that doesn't make it any less painful, or any less distressing to see her own blood on her mother's teeth.

Sam returns her attack, managing to knock Pam over only briefly, giving Sam only enough time to lunge for Pam's exposed stomach, making her trot away several steps when she gets to her feet.

And as Sam snaps her teeth at Pam, making Pam return her own hostile display, Sam sees, out of the corner of her eye, a brown shape launch itself at Pam, taking her by surprise and knocking her down fully, pinning her to the ground.

Tori.

Sam barely has time to react, moving to bite her mother's tail, tasting fur and flesh. Her instinct is good, because now that Tori has pinned Pam, she doesn't seem to know what to do other than snarl and snap in her face with a level of aggression that Sam is actually impressed by, even if she's not really attacking Pam. Pam bucks and writhes and gets to her feet and puts more distance between herself and the two younger werewolves, with Sam snapping at her ankles as she does.

She and Tori stand side by side, and Sam *feels* more confident now, *feels* like she has the upper hand, even though she knows Tori isn't exactly a hunter or a fighter. But Pam doesn't know that. She stands several yards away, about as far apart as she and Sam were when this all started, staring at them both, posture alert but less aggressive, now.

She looks at Sam in fury, growls, baring her teeth, and begins to back away.

Tori issues several powerful, angry barks after her, making her turn and quicken her pace.

Tori and Sam follow her gradually out of Shadow Creek Park, meeting her when she turns to snarl at them with their own displays of aggression, maintaining enough distance to hopefully not fight again, but trying to make sure Pam is going to leave. Once they've cleared enough distance, and watch her run away further out into the desert, she and Tori sprint back to their grove of trees in unison, instinct carrying them back to relative safety, or at least familiarity, at the same moment.

They spend a long night together, Sam literally licking her wounds, both of them taking turns nodding off, one of them always awake, senses alert for any sounds and smells that might

signal Pam's return. A few times, when they're both awake, they patrol the perimeter of the park together, scenting the air for any sign of Pam, watching each others' backs. As alarmed as Sam is by her mother's sudden disappearance, having Tori next to her makes her feel confident.

Pam doesn't show up, but given that they spend much of the night anxiously anticipating her, it doesn't make them feel much better.

In the morning, Sam is the one who happens to be awake as they begin to change back together, huddled close beneath the trees. Tori wakes up as she begins to change back, in contrast to the last time, when Tori hadn't seemed to wake up until she was entirely finished with her transformation. But then, Sam knows that neither of them slept deeply tonight.

As soon as Tori has human limbs again, she turns toward Sam, still crouching on the ground, as if her body hasn't quite remembered that she's bipedal. "Are you okay?" she asks Sam in a rush. Her teeth are chattering, her human flesh covered in goosebumps in the chill of the early spring morning.

"Yeah," Sam replies, voice raspy with lack of sleep, with stress, with the last bits of the wolf leaving her.

"Everything healed?"

"Yep."

Tori's eyes linger on her for another moment before she seems unable to ignore her own coldness and shifts over toward her clothes, dressing quickly in the dawn-tinged light. Sam does the same, though she still feels cold even as her clothes are put on, because the cold she feels is in her stomach, because she's somehow even more gripped by fear now that her rational mind is at the forefront.

Or, well, as rational as her human mind can be, anyway, because times like this, Sam doesn't feel any better at thinking clearly than she does as a wolf.

"What *happened* last night?" Tori asks as they redress.

The only thing Sam knows to say is, "That was my mom."

Tori stops, and stares at her for a long moment, shirt halfway on her arms. "Your *mom*?" she asks incredulously.

Sam nods. "Guess she finally came looking for me."

"But why were you fighting?"

"Because that always happens when we're together. We *don't* get along."

"That's horrible," Tori murmurs.

Something in her voice stings Sam. "I don't want your pity."

“No, that’s not what—sorry, I just don’t know how to respond when a friend tells me something like *that*.”

Sam’s metaphorical hackles lower. It’s not *Tori* she’s angry with right now anyway. “My mom and I...we’ve just always clashed. It only got worse when I hit puberty.” She grimaces. What an awful word. “We’ve never been able to find any common ground, never been able to live together without conflict, without bringing out the worst in each other. There were times when we both really tried, and things got a *little* better, but a lot of the time, it just turns into what happened last night. Doubly so if we’re wolves and can’t fight with words.”

“That fight was terrifying,” *Tori* shivers, though maybe because of the chill in the air.

“I know,” Sam agrees quietly. It’s one of the only times in her life that she’s willing to admit to being afraid, because it’s not something she can hide from *Tori*, anyway. *Tori* was there last night, she saw Sam’s body language. She knows that the fight itself was fairly tame, that all of them are capable of doing a lot more damage to each other, but the implications, her mother’s presence, had frightened her far more than the conflict itself. Sam’s reaction, plus the fact that *Tori* had never seen an actual fight like this, certainly contributed to *Tori*’s own fear.

“I didn’t know who she was,” *Tori* continues, “or what she wanted. I didn’t know why you wanted to confront her alone. I couldn’t understand why another wolf had come up there, I’d never seen one, and for her to be so *aggressive* when this is where I hang out...” *Tori* shakes her head. “It didn’t make any sense. It *still* doesn’t. How long has your mom been in LA?”

“No idea,” Sam shakes her head. “The first indication I had that she was here was when I smelled her last night. I haven’t heard from her in, like, over six months.”

Tori looks befuddled. “Why did she approach you like that? Why not just call you?”

“She knows I probably wouldn’t answer.” But Sam had never imagined that Pam would go so far as to *literally* track her down in her new city, her new home.

They’re fully dressed now, and Sam turns on her PearPhone to check the time, then takes in how *exhausted* *Tori* looks. *Tori* is scrutinizing her, and lingering on the light smear of blood on the top of Sam’s hand, residue that carried over, the way dirt did, after a transformation, even though the bite in her forearm had healed. It makes Sam remember biting her mother’s tail, and moves her tongue around in her mouth in distaste.

Maybe *Tori* notices, because she passes Sam a bottle of water from her giant purse. Sam swishes the first mouthful around and spits it out. She never feels this kind of disgust after a night of hunting, even though she’s often pretty keen to brush her teeth once she’s in human form after that. But it’s not nearly the same as the memory of what it tasted like to bite her mother.

But when Sam passes it back, *Tori* takes a sip of her own, the truest form of non-judgment that Sam thinks she can imagine in the moment. “We should see if Jade and Cat are here yet.”

Sam nods her agreement and the two of them approach the edge of their little protective cluster of trees and crouch, peering over toward the parking area. Jade's car isn't there yet.

Something occurs to Sam, and maybe the same thing occurs to Tori, because she asks, "How did your mom get all the way up here if she didn't drive?"

"No clue," Sam replies, though this makes her think of something else. "What if she's... hiding? Watching to see where we're going to go from here?"

Tori huddles a little closer to Sam at that. "Do you think she would?"

"I don't know. I wouldn't put it past her." She takes a deep inhale, trying to detect any trace of Pam's scent. She can't find anything, but that doesn't mean she isn't out there. Sam's nose isn't quite as strong when she's a human, and besides, she could be downwind.

A few moments later, a car becomes visible on the horizon. She and Tori watch as it moves closer and closer. Once it's near enough to discern any details about it, it's clear that it's Jade's car. Still, when Jade pulls into the parking area, neither Tori nor Sam move toward her at first. "Do you think it's safe?" Tori asks.

"I think so," Sam says cautiously, but she still isn't moving.

"What if," Tori starts, "she somehow convinced Jade to let her in the car?"

Sam actually snorts at this a little. "Jade doesn't seem like the type to pick up hitchhikers."

"Are you kidding? Jade *lives* for enacting horror movie scenarios in real life." But then Tori shakes her head. "But you're right, I'm probably being paranoid. It's just so *odd* that you don't even know how long she's been here, or how she found you..."

It makes Sam's stomach sink, this idea that she's been so vulnerable for who knows how long. Has her mother been watching her? Does she know about Cat? How can Sam keep Cat safe from her now?

There's no way to know anything, and Sam hates that ambiguity. But she also decides there's no reason to delay anything any longer, and stands up, prompting Tori to stand with her. They look at each other for just a moment, and maybe there's still some primal connection from so recently being wolves together, but they don't require any words before they launch themselves out of the cover of the trees and start sprinting for Jade's car.

They tumble into their respective seats, breathing heavily. "Didn't get enough chasing last night, huh?" Jade drawls, lightly amused. She turns to give Tori a kiss, and frowns when Tori's eyes are out her own window, scanning the park.

But Cat says quietly, "Sam, what's wrong?"

"Just drive," Sam advises Jade. Jade meets her eyes in the rearview mirror for just a moment before she begins backing out, getting back on the road.

Sam looks out the rear window behind them, Tori's eyes are on the side mirror of the car. "See anything?" she asks.

"Nope," Sam replies, finally settling back into her seat.

"Sam?" Cat asks again, tone even more concerned now.

"You gonna tell me what's going on?" Jade asks, an edge of anxiety in her tone.

Sam takes a deep breath. "My mom showed up at Shadow Creek Park last night. We fought. I don't know what she's doing here or how she found me or what she wants."

Cat takes her hand and squeezes it, hard. Sam really looks at her, for the first time since getting into the car, because she's been so worried about *protecting* her that she hasn't even allowed herself the distraction of looking at someone she cares about so much. She smiles at Cat. It's weak, but it's present, as Cat holds onto her hand.

"You *fought*?" Jade asks, sounding alarmed.

Cat gasps, "You're bleeding!"

Sam glances down at her arm, at the smear of blood that comes out from under the cuff of her hoodie and covers the top of her hand. "I'm not," she assures everyone. "My cuts healed when I changed back. I just need to wash it off."

Cat looks at her with wounded eyes. "She made you *bleed*?"

"She could have done a lot worse, but we drove her off. Which, I would have been in *trouble* if Tori hadn't helped me. She jumped out at her when she wasn't wasn't expecting it and completely knocked her on her ass." The memory makes her smile a little more, despite everything else. "Thanks, by the way," she says, offering Tori her genuine gratitude.

Tori smiles, but she shakes her head. "I wasn't going to let you face someone like that on your own. Even if I had *no idea* who she was at the time."

Before Sam can respond, her phone buzzes in her pants pocket. She pulls it out to find a text from an unknown number.

We need to talk

Sam feels that cold knot of fear in her stomach, knowing it's from her mother, and squeezes Cat's hand harder.

But, she's Sam, and she's out of the abandoned park, away from the imminent threat of her mother's presence, and so her fear quickly turns to anger.

Really? You couldn't just text me this yesterday?

I'm sure that would have led to the same

kind of warm welcome I got last night

Sam takes a deep breath and refuses to get drawn into yet another fight, purposely putting her phone in her pocket. "My mom texted. She wants to talk."

"Oh, hell no!" Tori bursts out. "After last night?"

"I don't want you near her, Sam," Cat adds, sounding *adorably* stubborn.

It makes Sam's heart swell in her throat, and maybe that is enough to finally burn away the rest of the fear and anxiety she's been carrying since her mother showed up.

She's Sam Puckett, and she has to defend what's hers.

"No, you know what? She's right. I do have to talk to her. And tell her to leave me the fuck alone."

And Tori, who moments ago seemed opposed to the entire idea, quickly replies, "If you're confronting her, I'll be right there with you. I'm not letting you do this alone."

"I'm not either!" Cat insists. "I want to tell her myself not to hurt you anymore!"

"I'm fine, Cat," Sam reassures her, because she is, her wounds have healed, and it's not as if a bite to the foreleg is the most painful part of Sam's history with her mother.

"Guess you three will need someone to drive you around," Jade comments, sounding disinterested.

Tori turns to stare at her, incredulous.

Jade rolls her eyes, "Okay, *obviously* I'm in. If I had to miss a werewolf showdown in the park last night, I for *sure* want to be there for the one where you're not biting and tackling each other."

Harvest

[A postcard of a photograph of the brightly lit “Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas Nevada” sign centered on top of a collage of several different photos of the casinos and attractions in Las Vegas]

Made it here again. It’s crazy how this city just like appears in the distance like a cluster of stars in the middle of a deep, dark desert. This place is sleazy and flashy and everything I should hate but I can’t help but love it. As long as I don’t run into my mom here I’m good.

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But in spite of Sam’s determination to speak to her mom, face to face, there’s still an entire day of school to get through. Sam doesn’t know how on earth she’s supposed to pay attention.

They drive to Tori’s house first, and luckily Tori’s dad isn’t awake this time when they go inside, so no one notices Sam’s bloody arm before she’s able to take a shower and wash everything about the night before off. Once she’s clean and dressed in fresh clothes, Sam feels even more ready to confront her mom. She feels like *herself* again, and not a scared puppy, caught off guard and vulnerable in a remote place that felt like only adventure before.

When she comes out of the bathroom, Cat is cooking breakfast again, and Sam can smell that coffee is brewing. As she looks across the room at her girlfriend at the stove, she’s absolutely *giddy* with affection for her, and she strides across Tori’s house purposefully.

Cat flashes her a smile, but it’s a little weak with worry. “I hope you’re hungry,” she comments.

In reply, Sam walks right up to her and wraps her arms around her, cradling her head in her hand, and kisses her deeply.

“Whoa,” Jade laughs in surprise, over by the coffee machine. Sam ignores her.

When they pull apart, Cat is *beaming* now, eyes warm and dark and glittering with mirth. “What was that for?”

Sam shrugs in faux nonchalance, “Because I finally brushed my teeth. And you made me breakfast.” But she smiles at Cat, a smile full of promises and tenderness, and she’s pretty sure Cat gets it when her eyes crinkle with mischievous delight.

“Go get some coffee, I need to focus on not burning your eggs.” Cat bumps Sam playfully with her shoulder.

“You do that. Very important,” Sam replies, heading over to where Jade is standing and pouring herself a cup of coffee.

After breakfast, they head for school, Sam signs in at the front office, and she goes to the library lounge. As she had expected, it's awfully hard to pay attention in school today, when all she can really think about is all the things she wants to say to her mother, all the ways she wants to make sure she knows that she's not welcome around Sam or her friends and especially not her girlfriend.

Sam lets her online classes play in front of her, hoping she'll absorb some of the material as she obsesses about other things, and at some point in the late morning, she's already worked herself up so much that she's exhausted all over again, and she falls asleep on one of the library lounge couches, until the bell for lunch wakes her up.

Well. Not her best day at online school, but not her worst, either.

At lunch, their other friends are sitting with them, so they can't exactly talk freely, but they keep looking at each other, scrutinizing each other, as if reminding one another that all of them are thinking about what happened last night.

Apparently, they're acting oddly enough that their companions notice. Or, at least Andre does, since Beck and Robbie are pretty focused on each other. "What's going on with you guys?" Andre asks.

It's a fair question, Sam realizes. Jade is playing with her fork anxiously and is even grouchier than normal, Tori looks like she's barely functioning from lack of sleep, the strain evident on her face, and Cat is practically glued to Sam's side, both out of concern and affection. Not that Sam minds. Andre had also already commented that Sam's hands seem better, and Sam had just offered the explanation that Cat had gone overboard wrapping them when she'd gotten a minor injury. Andre had seemed to accept that explanation at the time, but Sam wonders whether her hands are just one more oddity that he can't help but notice on a day like today.

"Nothing," Tori says, too quickly.

Andre looks at her, eyes narrowed. "You don't look like you're feeling well. Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine," Tori replies, her tone about as close to snapping as it can get while still sounding polite, "I just didn't sleep well."

Andre nods, eyes shifting to Jade, then to Sam, and he seems to lose his nerve about asking any more questions, and changes the subject entirely. "How are you guys feeling about your one-person shows? Cat, how did you do on yours?"

Cat is at least game to talk about Baberaham Lincoln (making Sam roll her eyes affectionately) and it seems to make Andre drop the topic, thankfully. Sam had honestly almost forgotten about that class assignment since Cat is finished with it. She wonders whether she'll have to sit through everyone else's one-person shows and whether they'll be as weird as Cat's.

During afternoon break, they get time to talk and strategize for a moment.

“So, I’m going to text my mom a place and time after school. That’ll give me the upper hand,” Sam decides.

“That sounds solid,” Jade agrees, “but how close to sundown will this be?”

“We’ll do it right after school,” Sam says. “That’ll give us plenty of time before anyone will have to change.”

Tori nods, and then asks hesitantly, “What if it turns into another fight?”

“It might,” Sam says grimly, “but I don’t think it’ll get physical, really.”

Tori nods, but she still looks concerned. Cat finally voices her concern, “Are you sure you want to do this? Maybe if you ignore her, she’ll go away.”

“She came this far to find me,” Sam replies. “I have to make sure she knows that whatever she’s trying to get from me, it’s not going to work. And that she needs to keep away from you.” She slips her arm around Cat’s waist and squeezes her.

Cat seems to go pale. “Why? Is she after me?”

“Nah. But I don’t want her to try to get to me through you, is all.”

“How would she *get through* me?” Cat gulps.

“She *won’t*,” Sam says patiently, “because I’m going to stop her.”

“Sam, no offense,” Tori says hesitantly, “but she’s pretty scary.”

Sam blinks. “Why would that offend me?”

“I just mean,” Tori says slowly, “what makes you think you can go up against her and she’ll listen?”

Sam gets why Tori said ‘no offense’ now. Tori doesn’t want to say it out loud in front of the others, but she saw how scared Sam was last night, how outmatched she was. “Because I’m much better at fighting with her as a human,” Sam says in a low voice. She grins bitterly. “I’ve had plenty of practice.”

Tori still doesn’t look quite convinced, but she nods.

Cat, though, still seems stuck on what Sam had said before. “I mean, I *want* to be there to confront her because I want to tell her to stay away from my girlfriend but I don’t want her to target me because I just couldn’t stand up to a werewolf alone,” she rambles.

Sam turns to her and grasps both her shoulders gently. “Cat. Babe.” Cat raises her troubled gaze to meet Sam’s. “*Nothing* is going to happen to you. I promise.”

A promise isn’t something Sam gives lightly. And Cat knows that. Maybe that’s why she takes a deep breath and seems to calm down, a slow smile spreading over her face as she

looks at Sam.

“Snoodle on your own time, we’re on a schedule,” Jade says in a bored tone.

“Leave them alone, they’re cute,” Tori argues.

Sam shoots a glare at both of them. “I’m texting my mom as soon as school lets out. We’ll meet her at the park.”

Tori chews her lip. “What if she doesn’t show up until it gets late?”

“She’ll show,” Sam says, with finality, before the bell signals for everyone to get to class. Sam isn’t even on the same class schedule as the others; she should probably go see what she’s missing.

Sam fidgets and stares into space and checks her phone and gets lost in thought until the school day ends. As soon as she shuts her computer and slips it into her bag, she pulls out her phone and texts her mom.

Meet me where we met last night in 20 minutes

Let’s talk

She finds Cat at her locker, and smiles at her. “You ready?” she asks her.

“I’m ready,” Cat replies, squaring her shoulders and putting confidence in her tone. Sam slips her hand into Cat’s.

They find Tori and Jade at Jade’s locker, and the four of them walk out to Jade’s car together. It seems to make the most sense to just stick together for this.

They’re all pretty quiet as they drive from the school to Shadow Creek Park. Sam confirms that she texted her mom, that her mom read it, but didn’t respond. But Sam is confident she’s going to show up.

“So,” Jade drawls in a faux casual tone, “should we hit up Jet Brew now, or after?” When she receives only incredulous and unamused looks in response, she groans. “Oh my god. Okay, I know that’s an *after* the big mother/daughter werewolf showdown activity. I’m not an *idiot*.”

Sam snorts, which seems to be the cue the other two need to actually laugh at Jade’s sarcasm. It helps lighten the mood a bit as they approach Shadow Creek Park. Who knew that Jade, who seems to exist in a state of perpetual tension, would be so good at breaking it?

They pull up to their destination and Jade parks the car. There are no other cars there, no sign of anyone else. They all gaze around the park in silence.

“You’re sure she’s coming?” Tori asks.

Sam *had* been pretty certain. Her mother had been all about talking this morning, and Sam had offered her exactly the opportunity she claimed to want. “She’s coming,” Sam insists, opening her car door and stepping out.

The other three follow her, and they stand in the middle of the park now. Watching in all directions, and waiting. It’s been about thirty minutes since Sam sent that text.

She’s a little less certain, especially when there’s been no response at all from her mom. Not that she’d be able to see it if there were, without cell service up in the park.

But then, as they’re standing around kicking at rocks in the dirt, trying not to get too caught up in the anxiety of waiting, Tori says, “Car.”

Sam looks up, following Tori’s gaze. There’s a car on the horizon, approaching them.

Sam takes several steps toward the parking area, her friends behind her, and they all watch silently as the car closes the distance between them, pulls up next to Jade’s.

Pam Puckett gets out of the passenger seat, and the car drives away.

Pam approaches the group of them, looking a little surprised to see more than just Sam there, but she doesn’t appear to think much of it as she moves closer. Sam takes another step toward her, just to put herself in front of her friends, to squarely face her mother.

Pam looks...well, basically the same. Still almost a foot taller than Sam. Still flashy, and trashy, with an obvious disregard for authority or social niceties. That attitude is about the only thing she and Sam ever had in common, really. But it’s almost a relief to see her mother looking like she’s always remembered, so human and so obviously just *herself*, that Sam stands taller, and feels completely unintimidated.

“Sam,” Pam greets her dryly.

“Mom,” Sam replies evenly.

They look at each other, sizing each other up. Finally, Pam waves a hand at Sam, “Well, you wanted to talk, so. Talk.”

Sam laughs harshly, “You’re the one who suggested it first.”

“Well, I couldn’t get through to you last night, so I thought I could get you to listen to reason when you weren’t so driven by your animal side. You’re even more stubborn and brainless as a wolf.”

Sam recoils, baffled and offended. “Right, because coming up to me and *attacking* me definitely felt like a *well-reasoned* speech last night. What the hell were you even trying to accomplish?”

"I was trying to get you to come home with me," Pam replies, her tone half anger, half pleading.

Sam folds her arms. "I *am* home."

"Please," Pam scoffs. "Los Angeles? This is not a place for people like us, *especially* not talentless, utterly average people like *you*."

Sam grits her teeth. "Yeah, your flattery *really* makes me miss living with *you*."

Pam throws her hands up in exasperation. "Well, *excuse* me for telling you the honest truth. You know, I've never tried to sugarcoat things for you because the world isn't like that. And I know better than *anyone* what kind of chronic screw-up you are." She shakes her head. "I've been looking for you since you *left*, because I knew you couldn't survive on your own. I knew you'd blow your cover, you'd tell the wrong person what you are and get yourself arrested or killed. I couldn't have that on my conscience, my own kid, screwing things up so badly. And if you haven't done it *yet*, it's only because I got here just in time." She gives Sam a stern look. It's almost a sneer. "Come home with me, Sam. I know we don't always get along, but I will keep you safe, and I will keep our secrets."

"No," Sam says. It's just a single, firm syllable, almost neutral, expressionless. But Sam feels her confidence grow just from saying it.

Pam rears back as if Sam slapped her. "*No*?" she replies incredulously.

"No," Sam repeats. "I'm not going anywhere with you. Because I already *have* a home."

Pam scowls deeply. "I am your *family* and I didn't turn my back on you. I searched for you for *months*. And you will not turn your back on me, either."

Sam chuckles, just once. "*You*? You're a pathetic excuse for a mother. If that's the best you have to offer, then you can just turn around right now. Because I've already found *far* better people to surround myself with."

Pam's eyes dart around to Sam's three companions, dismissively. "These people?" she snorts. "Please." Her expression turns stern. "You're coming home with me, before you screw things up for all of us. You've never been able to handle yourself, and I've spent my life cleaning up your messes. I've always protected you."

Now Sam laughs fully, though more in anger than humor. "You left me all alone for my first transformation to go help Melanie."

"A decision I regret," Pam replies grimly, "since she knows how to handle herself, unlike you."

"She 'handles herself' by refusing to have anything to do with what we are," Sam snarks. She doesn't mean to throw her sister under the bus, but it stings to recall the ways she's always felt that Melanie was prioritized over her.

“And *you* handle yourself by stealing from me and leaving without a word, only to move across the country and take up with a bunch of people who can’t possibly respect you. I mean,” she gestures at Sam, “Look at you! And look at them! We’re not like these people.”

It makes Sam hesitate, for just a moment, and she can tell from the gleam in her mother’s eye that Pam notices. And it’s not even because she distrusts her friends, who are standing by her for support, it’s because what Pam says is something *very* close to what Sam herself had said to Cat about Tori, a month and a half ago. It’s exactly what Sam herself has been wrestling with internally as she’s befriended a group of private school kids (even though she has plenty of evidence now to know that they don’t come from perfect families and most of them are solidly middle-class, not *rich*). But there will always be that small part of her that knows where she comes from, and knows she’ll never *not* be a poor kid raised by a trashy, slutty single mom, the one who *wasn’t* smart (or maybe desperate) enough to get herself sent to boarding school, whose saving grace was the charity of the much stabler family across town despite their absent military father.

“That’s not true!” It’s not Sam who says it. It’s Cat, speaking for the first time. Her fists are clenched and she’s glaring at Pam.

Pam looks at her, unimpressed. “Who even are you, Raggedy Ann?”

“No,” Cat sounds confused and annoyed. “I’m Cat.”

“She’s my girlfriend,” Sam says, leveling her mother with an intimidating glare.

Pam looks at Sam slowly, and shakes her head. “So *this* is why you’re *pretending* you belong here? Why you’re carelessly spilling our secrets? For a *girl*?” She chuckles, bitterly, humorlessly. “Oh, this is *exactly* why you can’t be trusted. Love ain’t real, baby. And I should know.”

“Just because you can’t find love doesn’t mean Sam hasn’t,” Cat shoots back, sounding furious.

Pam actually laughs. “You got yourself a real firecracker, don’t you? Guess it’s true what they say about redheads, huh?”

Sam wants to deflect Pam’s attention away from Cat, especially after such a solid jab. “Why do you even want me to come back with you, anyway? It’s not like you’ve ever *cared* about anything I’ve done. Carly’s *brother* raised me more than you ever did, fed me more often, taught me more about being a werewolf. Why are you even *here*?”

“Because I don’t want to see you screw up your life!” Pam says emphatically. “I don’t want to see you throw your life away because you’re feeling rebellious or think you might be in love, or *whatever* is going on here. I’m *still* your mother, and you’re still *a kid*.” She *almost* sounds like she cares, but Sam knows her well enough to know that what Pam really cares about is controlling somebody. Maybe she’s been single for too long, and is looking for another easy target. Well, Sam isn’t going to be that any more. Not for anyone.

"I'll be eighteen in less than a month. Not enough time for you to try to force anything through the courts, especially with *your* record. So I'm not going anywhere. I've found everything I need right here." She spreads her arms. "I don't need a parent. I just need people I can trust. And I have that."

Pam looks disappointed. "I thought I taught you that you can't trust anybody."

"She can trust me," Tori cuts in. Then she smiles and waves. "Hi, you might remember me as the werewolf who totally knocked you over last night? Sorry to meet on such awkward terms, but...you were being a pretty big bitch to my friend, here."

For the first time, Sam sees a flicker in Pam's eyes, like a flame extinguishing, as she begins to realize she's not going to win this one.

"You must feel *pretty* stupid to have come all this way only to find out Sam's *kind of* thriving without you," Jade smirks through her mocking tone.

Sam folds her arms. "We may be blood, but you haven't been my family for a long time. The family I left in Seattle? That was Carly, Spencer, even Freddie." Maybe not Gibby, though. That'd be weird. "And here? I've got Jade, who is awesome. I've never met somebody I have more in common with. I have Tori, who I know has my back, and now you know it, too. And I have Cat." For the first time, she really turns fully away from her mother to smile at Cat. "Who I care about more than anyone."

The truth of her words hit her, in a way she can't ignore but that also terrifies her.

She forces herself not to think about how deeply she cares about Cat and turns back to her mother. "So, yeah." She shrugs. "I'm good. And I will fight to protect any of these people, and anyone they care about. And right now?" She takes another step closer to her mother. "You're in *my* city, and you're not welcome here. So I suggest you take yourself back home where you belong and leave us *alone*."

Pam takes a step back, seemingly an unconscious reaction. "You're making a huge mistake."

"I doubt it," Sam replies evenly. She glances at her friends. "We're gonna go."

"It *wasn't* nice to meet you," Cat sneers as she walks by Pam. Sam is irrationally proud of how rude Cat is being. She knows it's not something that comes naturally to her.

"If I see you again, I'll fight you again," Tori promises, putting all her actor training into her glower because even Sam finds her intimidating in the moment.

"Sucks to be you. Having Sam around is awesome," Jade comments with an air of nonchalance as she leads the way back to her car.

"Oh," Sam turns back around to face Pam again. "And whatever you did to Spencer or Freddie to make them tell you where I am? If I see you again, I will get you back for it. Leave them alone, too. Because I know where you live." She hadn't even thought to ask either of the guys what had happened, but it occurs to her suddenly how Pam must've found her. How

she'd ended up near Shadow Creek Park will probably always remain a mystery. Maybe it was merely close to a deserted location she'd decided would be a good place to change, while she was here. Who knew? But if Sam can extend her protection up to Seattle, too, she'll at least make the effort.

"You're no daughter of mine!" Pam calls after her, voice desperate, angry.

"Good," Sam shouts back. "Wasn't that great a thing to be anyway!"

They get into the car, and Sam can feel that everyone is moving with the same faux casual energy, trying to make an exit without letting out that they're nervous. Well, Sam isn't nervous, not anymore, not now that she's pretty damn sure she'd managed to cut her mother out of her life, for good this time.

"Relax," she tells them as they all get in the car. "She's not going to do anything."

They all stare at her through the windshield for a moment. She's standing in the middle of the park, staring at them, clearly seething.

"Let's just go," Sam prompts, and Jade starts the car and backs out without another word.

They're quiet for a long moment, and the further away they get from the park, the more the tension in the car seems to ease, until finally Jade quips, "Well, I know I'm never complaining about my mom again, how about you guys?"

"She's scarier as a wolf," Tori decides, but then looks over her shoulder at Sam with a frown. "How are you *so short*?"

"I...don't know?" Sam replies, but she's too happy with everyone in this car who came with her to even be offended by Tori's comment.

"I didn't think she was scary at all," Cat says airily. Sam gazes at her, surprised. Cat deflates. "Okay, that's a lie, but I think I was really intimidating, wasn't I?"

Sam grins, feeling herself melt, remembering the truth of the words she'd said about Cat to her mother. "You were a total badass."

Cat beams back at her, and then, almost in unison, everyone's phones buzz with notifications as they get back into cell service range. It makes Sam think of something, and she pulls out her phone to text her sister Melanie.

Hey so Mom showed up out of nowhere

to try to force me to come home

But it didn't work

So I think Mom just disowned me

So I dunno if that means she's going to come to you

You know, try to make sure her only kid still likes her?

So I'm sorry if you get an visit you don't want

Wow

Thanks for the warning, I'll be ready if she shows

I hope you're finally free!

Sam smiles, a little. She may not have much of anything in common with Melanie, but she's the only blood relative left that Sam feels any sort of obligation to. And now, with Sam's obligation fulfilled, there's nothing else to talk to her twin about, and she puts her phone away.

But a moment later, Tori looks up from her phone with wide eyes. "Oh my god. How is your mom supposed to call someone to come get her with no cell service up there?"

It takes a few seconds for them all to start laughing, but once they do, it takes full minutes for them to stop.

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[A postcard showing a painting of a man fly fishing in a river, standing in rushing water up to his mid-calf. Behind him are tall, white-tipped mountains and a few tall evergreens. The sky is gray and blue. Text at the bottom reads "Klamath Falls, Oregon" over paintings of several fly fishing lures]

Oregon feels a little too close to home, to be perfectly honest. Not like I actually think I'm gonna run into anyone I don't want to see, but being back in the Pacific northwest...I don't know if I want to, under the circumstances. It's not that I want you to come back—no, I do—I just don't know how to go back without you. So I'm just dipping into Oregon and then I guess I'll see what California has to offer.

Always, Sam

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They end up spending that night at Tori's. It just feels natural, after their experience telling off Sam's mom in Shadow Creek Park. To Cat, it feels a bit like a safety in numbers thing. Though Sam seems confident that it's over, and her mom certainly didn't seem inclined or even capable of following them, Cat knows she'll be looking over her shoulder for the next few weeks, just in case. To her, it feels like the most secure choice, to spend the night in the house owned by werewolf parents.

It's also just a good excuse to bond, as they hang out all together downstairs on the sofas, with Sam and Tori as wolves, heads on their girlfriends' laps, while Cat and Jade bicker over what to watch on TV and Cat feeds Sam way too much beef jerky.

Eventually, Tori and Jade go upstairs to bed, and she and Sam get ready to sleep on the couches. Or at least, Cat assumes that's what they're going to do, since the couches aren't very big and they're not the most private place to sleep in the house.

But after Cat brushes her teeth and changes into her pajamas, she comes out to find Sam sitting up on one of the couches, waiting for her. Cat giggles affectionately at the sight of her, her bright golden-ringed blue eyes, the way her tail thumps on sight of Cat.

"Good night," she murmurs, wrapping her arms around Sam in a hug, burying her face in her thick fur and inhaling the comforting scent of her. Sam huffs out a contented sigh, resting her muzzle on Cat's shoulder as they embrace.

But when Cat steps away to move toward the other couch, Sam whimpers and paws at the couch she's sitting on.

Cat turns, tilting her head uncertainly. "Will we both fit on the same couch?" she wonders aloud.

Even just the question makes Sam's tail wag excitedly and she rears up on her back legs, briefly.

"I guess we could try," Cat agrees, grabbing the pillow she'd left on the opposite couch and approaching Sam again.

Sam backs up to give her space, still standing on the couch, tail still wagging a bit as she watches Cat arrange her pillow and cover herself with the blanket. When Cat is settled, she looks at Sam and tilts her head in something approximating a shrug, then lifts the blanket invitingly.

Sam wriggles her way under the blanket, on the very edge of the couch, back pressed flush against Cat's chest. Cat laughs softly, already enjoying the softness and warmth of Sam, remembering the way Sam had talked about feeling protective of her and feeling warmer still, a sensation emanating from her chest. She wraps her arm around Sam's body, holding her close to keep her from sliding off of the couch.

She wonders if this will be comfortable enough to fall asleep, especially since she knows she can't exactly roll over in the night, but it feels like just as she accepts that limitation, she falls asleep almost immediately, feeling enveloped in Sam, who that *very day* had told Cat and everyone important to her that she cared about her more than *anyone else in the world*...

When Cat wakes up hours later, early morning light is filtering in through the windows of the Vega house, and Cat feels Sam shiver and twitch back into human form and finds herself cradling her naked girlfriend, hand cupping her bare breast.

This definitely isn't the first time she's touched Sam's bare breast. Nor is it the first time Sam has been naked in front of her, or even naked on the same bed as her, but this time, they're under the blankets together, and all the specificities of the situation combined feel *very* intimate, leaving Cat breathless and uncertain of how to proceed.

But while Cat lies frozen, finally, Sam stretches long on the couch, back arching slightly away from Cat's body before she settles back into position flush against her. Cat still hasn't moved her hand. "You know," Sam says quietly, voice rough and *sexy*, "if you wanted to cop a feel, you didn't have to wait 'til I was asleep."

Cat draws her hand away, embarrassed, "I didn't mean to—"

"I know," Sam says quickly, reaching to grab Cat's fingers before she can retreat entirely, squeezing them, "I know you didn't. But I've gotta admit, it was a nice way to wake up."

Her voice is so warm, it makes Cat feel like it wraps around her, enveloping her, like the blanket they're sharing. "Go put clothes on," she replies in a very small voice, knowing how tempted she feels.

"Hang on a sec, let me brace myself," Sam replies, letting go of Cat's hand. Cat can't help herself, and she trails her fingers over the soft skin of Sam's side, over the curve of her hip, then back up toward her ribs again. It takes her a second to realize Sam has gone still. "You're not making this any easier," Sam breathes.

Cat retaliates with a pinch to Sam's arm.

"Ow," Sam rolls off the couch and crouches on the floor, frowning and rubbing her arm. "What was that for?"

"Just trying to make it easier for you," Cat smiles slyly, eyes dipping to roam over Sam's exposed skin. "Hurry up and get dressed so we can cuddle again."

"Yeah, yeah," Sam mutters. No one else is awake, so Sam unabashedly picks up the borrowed t-shirt and shorts of Tori's as well as her clean underwear (they'd done a small load of laundry here so they'd have clean clothes to wear to school today, even if they were the same clothes they'd worn on Monday; Cat wonders if anyone will actually notice) and dresses in the middle of the living room, then slips back under the blanket to press herself close to Cat on the couch.

They fit a little better under the blanket together. Cat knows they don't have much time left before they're supposed to get up to get ready for school, but she's going to enjoy what they have as much as possible.

Unfortunately, just as she drifts off to sleep is when Jade and Tori come downstairs and quietly call to them that it's time to get up.

It's almost odd that school today is utterly normal. Cat feels like something so significant happened these past couple of days, with Sam fighting her mom and then cutting her off for good, but she guesses, in the scheme of things, it doesn't change much in their daily life, the

change is mostly a mental reframing for Sam, who now knows she gets to live her life entirely on her own terms. Which Cat is eager to support her completely in doing.

When they get home from school, they're both definitely ready for a quiet night together in their apartment. Sam suggests that she take wolfsbane tonight, and though she claims it's so she and Cat can talk, since they're finally really alone together for the first time in days, Cat wonders if the intimacy of the morning on the couch is also a reason Sam wants to be human with Cat tonight.

But as Sam swallows her capsule, she frowns. "Oh," she says, looking at the little bottle it came in.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," Sam shakes herself off. "I meant to take one of my new chill out capsules. The kind I took last month?" Cat remembers last month. She remembers having Sam pinned beneath her on the couch, getting to take off her shirt and cover her breasts with kisses, feeling the way she squirmed beneath her. "But I took my old wolfsbane instead, the just regular kind that I stole from my mom." She shrugs. "It's not a big deal, but since we planned to just chill I was gonna take the other kind."

Cat feels herself start to smile. Last month, Sam had been pretty low energy on that chill wolfsbane, despite all they'd gotten into, and at the time, it had been pretty exciting for Cat to feel like she could just take her time with Sam and explore. But tonight, maybe the idea that Sam might take control a little excites her more. "Then maybe we don't have to just *chill*."

Sam's eyebrows rise. "What do you mean?"

Cat just smiles coyly. "I'm going to get started on my homework so I can finish it before dinner."

"Right, yeah, me too, I guess," Sam says, still watching Cat curiously.

But after homework, and dinner, and enough time in front of the TV for food to settle in their stomachs, talking isn't really where things go.

Though it does seem like Sam makes an effort, at first. "Hey," she says, nudging Cat.

"Hey, yourself," Cat giggles, nudging her back.

"I'm really happy, being here with you," Sam says quietly.

"Me, too," Cat agrees, slipping her arm around Sam on the couch and squeezing her tightly.

"Meeting you," Sam continues, "is probably one of the best things I accidentally did. With you, I found a home, I found people I could trust, I found someone more special to me than I could say..."

"Really? Who?" Cat teases.

Sam pokes her side, making her squeak. “Shut up. I’m trying to be real with you here.”

“Sorry,” Cat laughs, poking Sam back, which makes Sam grab her hand.

“I’m just trying to say that with you I found everything I’d left behind in Seattle, and then some. And it’s even better, because my mom doesn’t live here, and now I don’t think she’s ever coming back.”

“She’d better not,” Cat says in a low growl, clenching the fist that isn’t being held in Sam’s hand.

This just prompts Sam to grab her other hand, holding them both as she faces Cat on the couch. “I guess I’m just trying to say...thanks. I don’t know what I’d be without you, but I wouldn’t be nearly so happy as I am.”

As touched as Cat is, she can’t stop thinking of Sam fighting for her to be able to perform her Baberham Lincoln show, in spite of her apparent disregard for its artistic merit, of Sam protecting her from her mother, of Sam announcing to everyone how important Cat is to her. Of waking up this morning with her hand over Sam’s breast, of having Sam beneath her last full moon (and all the kisses and touches in between), of the way it feels when Sam kisses her, touches her, brings her so close to wanting that Cat doesn’t know if she can wait anymore.

Cat wants to feel that now. So her reply to Sam is to lean into her and kiss her.

Sam kisses back with a hum of approval in her throat, hands already shifting to tug Cat closer on the couch, mouth warm and gentle and very focused on Cat’s.

And as they keep kissing, Cat is the one who leans back and begins to pull Sam on top of her, the TV completely forgotten by now.

“Goddamn, Cat,” Sam pants as she shifts, settling on top of her on the couch. “You’re so...” She trails off.

But Cat wants to hear her say it. She wants to hear *everything* Sam might have to say about her. “What am I?” she prompts gently, kissing Sam’s chin.

“So fucking hot,” Sam murmurs breathlessly. It’s not what Cat expects to hear. Her romantic imagination always tends toward softer words, prettier ones, but the juxtaposition between her expectation and Sam’s rougher vocabulary is a shock to her senses, and a greater turn-on than she thought possible.

“Sam,” she gasps. “Kiss me,” she orders, tugging Sam down to meet her mouth.

Sam complies with a groan, settling her weight on top of Cat as they kiss, one hand slipping beneath the hem of her top. Cat feels warm fingers spread along her stomach, just above her hip bone, just below her ribs, and arches into Sam, encouraging her touch. She knows just how much temptation she’s inviting for them both, but she also knows just how much of it she can handle.

She hopes.

Sam takes her implicit invitation, though, and her hand moves up Cat's body, fingers tracing along the lower edge of her bra as they kiss. Her hands wander beneath Cat's shirt and Cat feels the paths they take all over her skin, like they leave little tingling trails of fire in their wake, like she's feeling Sam's touch all over her, all at the same time. It makes her stomach clench with need.

"I want more of you," Sam growls, nuzzling her neck, hand grasping at her breast through her bra, fingertips dipping beneath the fabric with the motion of her hand.

"Yes," Cat breathes her approval, shifting on the couch under Sam, and Sam follows the implicit suggestion of her body's movements and begins to tug at her shirt. Cat raises her arms and lets Sam pull her shirt up over her head, giggling softly as her red hair cascades over her face, and she shakes her head and blows at it as Sam finishes removing her shirt and tosses it to the floor.

She feels those warm fingertips on her face now, brushing her hair away. "Still with me under there?" Sam teases.

"You're one to talk," Cat replies, pushing Sam's blonde curls away from her face. She settles her hand at the back of Sam's neck, holding some of her hair back, and draws her down for another kiss.

This time, as Sam resettles on top of her, kissing her again, Cat notices the way their legs have intertwined, feels the presence, without any pressure, of Sam's thigh between her own. Even though it isn't really producing any sensation, it's exhilarating, just like Sam's hands, alternating their strokes all over the skin of her torso, Sam's mouth against hers, trailing down her neck, nibbling at her shoulder.

Cat's hands are wandering over the skin of Sam's lower back, beneath her t-shirt, and finally she whispers as Sam kisses her neck, "Take yours off, too."

Sam sits back on her heels, chuckling in an adorably bashful way as she tugs off her t-shirt. Cat takes in her face, framed by her blonde hair, the way her muscles stand out just slightly on her lean, pale arms and shoulders, the way her bra frames her breasts, cleavage drawing Cat's eye. Cat loves the secret softnesses of Sam, her breasts and belly, when so much of her seems so tough, so rigid, from the swagger of her walk to the set of her brow and the rasp of her voice to the blunt nails on hard-knuckled hands. And Cat loves all of it, is thrilled by all of Sam's juxtapositions and contradictions.

"Your bra, too," Cat orders softly, mind still somewhat fixated on the feel of that soft flesh beneath her hand that morning.

Sam's lip twitches in a smirk, eyes almost violet in the light of their colorful apartment. "Only if you take yours off, too."

Cat hesitates slightly, mostly because she remembers the last time she was topless under Sam, remembers the sheer level of temptation she'd experienced, remembered the reasons she'd

resisted snuggling with Sam again. Some of the things she'd thought were boundaries turned out to be more malleable, like the snuggling, like seeing Sam naked, but Cat worries that this is something that can make her spin out of control again, having clothes actually *come off*, being topless together.

But Sam seems to read something in her expression, and she gazes down at Cat with serious eyes. "Nothing else will come off. This is as far as we go right now. I promise."

Cat knows the worth of a promise from Sam. So she nods, face splitting into a grin, and sits up to take her bra off, as Sam does the same thing.

And while she's sitting up, she takes the opportunity to press her face against Sam's newly bare chest, feeling soft breasts against her cheeks, turning her head to kiss each breast, hands lifting to hold them as she lavishes attention on them.

She feels Sam's hands at the back of her head, threading through her hair, hears the way her breath catches as Cat kisses and nips at the sensitive skin of her cleavage. She can feel Sam's body push closer, is acutely aware of the way her hips drive the motion, even if they aren't really connecting with anything, but the suggestion of them drives Cat a little wild.

She leans back again, taking Sam with her, on top of her once again, leg wrapping around Sam's thigh, wanting to feel her between Cat's legs again. Sam shifts quickly from kissing Cat to trailing her mouth down to her chest, and Cat feels the sensation of Sam's lips along her collarbone, Sam's teeth at the swell of her breast, Sam's tongue flicking at her nipple.

She moans, a high-pitched, breathy sound that produces the lower rumble of a groan in Sam's throat. And this time, Cat doesn't *care* how needy she sounds. She *wants* Sam to know how much this is turning her on, wants Sam to know how strongly she desires her, not to tease, but to reassure, to validate, to ensure Sam that more intimacy is coming, once Cat feels good about their future, and what they mean to each other.

And the intimacy between them right now is *intense*, and glorious, each kiss of Sam's like a benediction, an reverent bestowal of affection. She can feel Sam's focus on her, knows that the kisses all over her breasts are an expression of desire for her, as intended for Cat's pleasure as they are a delight for Sam to press upon her skin. And Cat wants to sink into the bliss of Sam's mouth on her flesh and bask in it, pure, all-encompassing sensory delight like a hot bath, but *far* more exhilarating.

So Cat arches up into Sam, inviting her mouth to access any and all exposed skin, and it feels like Sam kisses her everywhere, making Cat's toes curl, but her lips are certainly drawn to the allure of Cat's breasts. And Cat certainly isn't complaining. The sounds pouring out of her mouth are anything *but* complaint.

Even if Sam hasn't explicitly told Cat that she loves her, Cat feels it acutely with each deliberate movement of Sam's lips and tongue over her breasts.

Maybe it's this notion that escalates things, briefly. Sam slips her hand beneath Cat's body, as if trying to lift her even closer to her face, and Cat feels a steadying palm at the dip of her lower back, strong fingers on her ribcage. Sam is still as flush against Cat's body as it's

possible to be, with her face buried in her breasts, and Cat realizes hazily that her legs are curled around Sam's body, and she's lifting her hips up against Sam's stomach rhythmically. It isn't something she'd been doing consciously, but now that she's started, she doesn't want to stop, because it feels too good.

And maybe that would be enough, maybe that would be all, and Sam would kiss her breasts until it felt appropriate to de-escalate to intensity, and they'd hold each other, bare skin on bare skin, and kiss and breathe until they regained control.

But that's not what happens.

Instead, Cat's hips are moving, barely making contact with anything, but the motion itself is arousing, Sam's hand on her back grips her more firmly, making her feel possessed and protected and secure all at once, and Sam's tongue flicks rapidly over one of Cat's nipples, already peaked and primed for pleasure from all the ministrations of Sam's mouth, and that particular focused sensation Sam delivers combined with all the other little factors, and Cat's brain swimming in the certainty of *love*, is enough to push Cat over the edge.

It's *barely* an orgasm, a brief flash in the pan, but Cat arches and bucks *hard* for just a moment, keening in bliss, as the orgasm rolls through her, like one big wave that leaves in its wake a placid sea, and Cat's eyes fly open, wondering *how* that could *possibly* have happened.

She realizes that the sensations on her breasts have ceased, and glances down to find Sam staring at her, wide-eyed and very still. "Did—did you just come?" Sam asks, voice awed.

"I...yeah, I think so," Cat replies breathlessly, feeling a blush spread over her cheeks. "It felt...different from when I'm...by myself."

She hadn't exactly *meant* to allude to Sam what she does in private because it's, well, *private*, but Sam appears all the more enthralled by her confession, and swallows audibly. "That was...uh...*fuck* that was sexy."

"I can't believe that happened," Cat murmurs, "I had like, *no* warning."

"Kinda thought nipple orgasms were a myth. Guess not." Sam is beginning to look supremely smug, making Cat giggle.

"Come here," Cat coaxes, prompting Sam to lift herself up and then lean over to kiss her, slowly settling back into place atop her, and Cat revels in the sensation of skin on skin, of the warmth of affection as Sam holds her on the couch. It's the same scenario she'd imagined before, with Sam backing them away from the edge.

Except that Cat had an orgasm.

But, she knows, neither of them had really been seeking it. Cat would've said something if she'd realized how close she was getting, Sam had clearly been *shocked*. And Cat...she's glad it happened.

It's odd, the way her concept of sex is already shifting, now that she's found the person she's certain she's going to make love to one day. She ponders this as Sam rests her head on her shoulder and they snuggle on the couch. Coming in front of Sam doesn't feel like sex, not least because neither of them were intentionally seeking that reaction. Cat supposes that it would definitely feel like sex if there had been any below the belt touching. But an orgasm with another person *is* significant. Especially when it's so often the goal of sex, anyway.

Is it a loophole? Has Cat found a way to have the pleasure of climax without the complication of sex, without the emotional intensity of allowing someone that degree of access to her body?

"What're you thinking about?" Sam asks as the silence stretches. She punctuates her question with a kiss to Cat's jaw.

Cat smiles at the contact. "Just thinking about what happened. What it means."

Sam shifts a little, rising so she can look at Cat. "Doesn't have to mean anything except it felt really good."

"No, I know, it did. It *wasn't* sex, but it was also really intense."

"It looked like it," Sam chuckles, but then sober. "If it was too much, we can take a step back. Until you're ready."

"No, that's the thing, I don't think it was too much. I'm still not ready for anything...lower, on the body, but I'm okay with more of what happened today."

Sam's eyes seem to gleam twilight blue for a moment. "Yeah?" she asks.

"Mmhmm," Cat hums in response, breath catching a little at Sam's eager expression.

"Good," Sam murmurs, then kisses just under Cat's ear before whispering, "because all I want to do is make you feel that good again."

A shiver of arousal rolls through Cat, just once, like that orgasm, but much less intense. "And I want to see if I can do the same for you," she whispers back, biting her lip after she voices her desire.

"Do your worst," Sam growls, making Cat shiver all over again.

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[A postcard of a drawing of a rustic signpost with slabs of wood and oars pointing to different California landmarks. Behind it can be seen a field full of wildflowers, a distant barn and some horses, and on the horizon, evergreen trees and mountains. The top of the postcard reads "Central Valley", and the bottom reads "California"]

Carly

Well I guess I did it. I visited every state and sent you a postcard from each one. I can't decide if it feels like you were with me or so far away from me that you don't matter. But of course you matter. You'll always matter to me. I can't let you go. I think I'm gonna head to LA. Last time we were there we really didn't get to see anything and, I don't know. Seems worth it. After that? I'm not sure where I'll be going or when you'll hear from me. Maybe one day I'll be ready to talk again. I hope you're happy in Italy. And I hope you know I'll always love you. Not a promise, just a fact.

Sam

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Sam feels like she's walking on air for the next several days, with the success of getting Cat off just by playing with her breasts. It's intimate and sexy and exciting and Sam feels like it's evidence of something much bigger growing between them, something deeper. This is about more than just desire and horniness and being seventeen, she's sure of that. This is about what it means to *be* together, to let each other in, to explore together. It's about *connection*.

Maybe she can't put it *quite* into those words, but that's the sense she gets, the truth that her more animalistic brain can understand on a level that her human mind trips up on. But she understands that it's significant, that's for sure. And Cat's agreement, that this can happen again, is just fuel for that fire.

Sam *adores* Cat. And maintaining the boundaries of their intimacy while slowly opening the door wider and wider as their connection grows is something so important for her. But admittedly, it isn't always easy. She tries not to compare Cat's limits to her time with Carly, that old idea that sex was only for someone Carly deemed important enough to give herself to. She knows that isn't why Cat is holding back. She tries to remind herself that there was a time in her life when *she* wasn't ready for sex, either, and that Cat is just learning about being with someone in a new way.

But as they creep closer and closer to intimacy that involves the whole body, Sam wonders just *what* Cat is waiting for.

For the next several weeks, Sam focuses her attention on Cat's breasts in a way that is *very much* intentional now. She wants to try to give her a nipple orgasm again. Now that she knows it's possible, she wants to master the technique, to figure out what, exactly, it takes to get Cat off from nipple stimulation.

But though they have plenty of steamy evenings topless together, Sam doesn't manage to accomplish it again.

For her part, Cat lavishes attention on Sam's own breasts. She seems enamored with them in a way that makes Sam feel *very* attractive, appreciated for her physical beauty in a way that's a little strange for her. Not that Carly didn't appreciate her that way. She *did*. It's just that the world at large seems to overlook Sam sometimes, like her rough edges obscure her beauty to the casual observer.

Cat overlooks nothing, though. She buries her face in Sam's breasts as if they're a desert oasis and she's dying of thirst. She spends ample time figuring out what Sam likes, ramping up the intensity of her attention. It's a lot of what they've done for the last month or so, except it's more frequent, and Cat is clearly comfortable with them being topless for much of their exploration.

But in spite of Cat's efforts, Sam doesn't achieve nipple orgasm, either. No, she achieves orgasm later on, the old-fashioned way, by herself, fueled by lingering sensation and the memory of Cat's enthusiastic attentions.

Still, despite the lack of orgasms, they have a fantastic, if busy, month together, thoroughly exploring this new territory. Sam studies at Hollywood Arts every day, and when they're at home together, they're doing things like figuring out how to make outlawed Blue Dog Soda, and spending far too much money at the Fresno Girl Doll store buying something for a particular babysitting charge they both like. There's even a day in which Nora Dershlit, a crazed *iCarly* fan who had kidnapped Carly, Sam and Freddie in the past, breaks out of prison to seek revenge on the three of them and ends up trying to get back at Sam by kidnapping Dice and Cat. But honestly, after the ordeal with her mom, Sam is barely fazed. She gets Nora locked back up and rescues her girlfriend and their friend, and it's kinda nice to feel like the hero, for the second time in about a month.

And Sam turns eighteen. It's in the middle of the school week, which means on the day itself, Sam has the experience of Cat's group of friends—which by now feels like *her* group of friends, too—celebrating with her. And then that weekend, Tori hosts a little party for them all, which includes a lot of delicious meats and a giant cake, so it's basically all Sam could ask for.

Life is going pretty great, and Sam is comfortable, and looking forward to the future.

And all that comes to a head when a postcard arrives in Sam and Cat's mailbox.

Strawberry

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

[A postcard showing an artist's rendering of the Palazzo Vecchio at the end of a street, framed by buildings that line the street leading to the spire as it rises into a blue sky smudged with clouds. White marble statues can be seen on display in front of the Palazzo Vecchio. Large, angular letters read "Firenze" at the bottom of the postcard, from Florence, Italy]

Sam,

It wasn't easy, but I got your address from Spencer. I don't even know if you want to hear from me at all, but I needed to tell you something. Italy has been awesome, but I'm going to college in the US. Maybe even Los Angeles. And I guess I wondered if we could kind of pick up where we left off, as best friends or otherwise. I really miss you. Getting all those postcards from you last summer and not being able to write back was so hard. I want you back in my life, and I still feel the same. Tell me you do, too.

Carly

PS: by the time this gets to you you'll be 18 so happy birthday!

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Cat is usually the one who remembers to check the mail. She doesn't remember every day, but that's probably because it's often empty, or not at all interesting; it's monthly utility bills or things addressed to Nona that still get sent to them, including weird catalogs that Nona doesn't even want but that Cat occasionally peruses out of curiosity more than interest.

Today, though, there's a postcard, and even if Cat doesn't know the Italian name for Florence on sight, she still somehow knows immediately what this postcard is. Her heart sinks and then speeds up as tension fills her.

She flips the postcard over, sees Sam's name at the top and Carly's at the bottom, and then audibly gasps, flipping it back over to cover the message.

This isn't for her to read. She knows that, she knows it would be wrong. But she can't help the way the postcard *pulls* at her, the unavoidable allure of something like a *secret*, a personal missive meant for her girlfriend's eyes, and Cat really *really* wants to know what it says.

Slowly, she flips the postcard over and looks, rationalizing that postcards are just *uncovered* for anyone to read if they choose to. Carly had to know that other people might read it. Nosy postal workers, nosy girlfriends-slash-roommates...

When she's finished reading it, she feels worse than the tug of *not* knowing had made her feel.

Cat hates that her very first thought is that she could throw this away and tell Sam there was nothing in the mailbox. This isn't the kind of person she is, or wants to be. She doesn't *want* to keep secrets anymore, and she doesn't want to lie to Sam, especially not the kind of lie that she might easily find out about. All it would take would be Spencer asking if she got Carly's postcard.

So Cat walks slowly back to the apartment as she considers what to do, and by the time she arrives, all she can think is that she is about to give Sam this postcard and she has no idea what the aftermath will be.

Sam is on the couch, flipping channels on the TV, as Cat comes in. She glances at her, a relaxed smile on her face, and asks, "We actually get something today?"

"You got a postcard," Cat says quietly.

"Huh?" Sam asks, in a tone that suggests she needs Cat to repeat the information. But Cat can't bring herself to say it again, so instead, she wordlessly holds out the postcard to Sam.

She sees Sam turn from the TV and her eyes catch the postcard, and from the way her face goes slack and frozen, Cat knows the significance of this strikes Sam immediately.

Sam reaches for it slowly, staring at it as she takes it from Cat's hands. She holds it with gentle fingers for a moment but then her hands start to tighten around the corners of the postcard. She takes a deep breath, glances at Cat, and turns it over.

Cat stands, uncertain what she's even supposed to do as Sam reads the postcard. Moments pass, that seem to stretch for far longer than seems natural. Cat's thoughts are racing, and she can't even really express *what* her thoughts are, just that she has too many of them, more than seems possible for the thirty seconds or so that Sam spends reading that postcard, the thirty seconds that feel like eons.

Finally, Sam looks up at her. "Did you read this?" she asks.

Cat is certain Sam already knows the answer, so she just replies, "Yes."

Sam nods, looking satisfied, her suspicion confirmed. Her eyes drop to the postcard again, but after a moment, she stands and walks back to the bedroom.

Cat doesn't know if she should follow, whether Sam wants to be alone, but before she can make a decision, Sam returns to the front of the house. She's walking a little stiffly, but her smile seems genuine enough as she meets Cat's eyes.

"What's for dinner?" Sam asks. Cat can tell she's trying hard to seem nonchalant.

But Cat can't just set aside something that seems like it should be so *significant*. "What are you going to tell Carly?" She can't help that the question falls from her mouth, can't help the note of desperation in her voice, can't help that she abruptly feels so utterly *replaceable*.

Sam's expression closes off, hardens, and her eyes dart away. "I honestly don't know."

Silence falls between them. Cat hates feeling this way. She hates that she doesn't even have the security of knowing that Sam *loves* her, because even as much as she thinks that she *feels* that love, it isn't the same as knowing it for sure, as hearing it from Sam's lips and feeling the truth of those words resonating deep in her bones.

Maybe it's a *good* thing, that she hasn't let Sam have sex with her yet. But that withholding is also something she's been struggling with, the fact that she's withholding something they *both* want from the two of them, for reasons that seem flimsier by the day. At least, they did, until Carly's postcard arrived.

And she hates that she's angry with Carly. Carly, who hasn't spoken to Sam in almost a year, who doesn't even know Cat *exists*, who must know all too well how Cat feels, to love Sam and to fear losing her... Carly doesn't deserve Cat's anger, but she has it, and it all just feels so *unfair* to Cat, so unfair to all of them. Because Cat can *hear* Sam in her head, whispering, "I loved her," about *Carly*, and the way those words ring true, Cat can feel their weight even now, the pressure of them in the air between herself and Sam and their apartment that suddenly feels far too small.

Cat isn't good with secrets. She isn't good at sweeping things under the rug, at hiding her feelings. There's a lot she isn't good at.

But she's good at acting. And she pulls herself together, pulls herself into a role, and decides to pretend that everything is fine, because if everything is *not* fine, then her world is about to shatter, and she can't handle that right now. "I thought maybe I'd cook up some hamburgers for dinner tonight," Cat says cheerfully, attempting to set aside entirely the question of Carly, electing to pretend, for the moment, that Sam had never indicated to her that she *doesn't* know whether she wants Carly back or not.

Sam perks up, a small smile returning to her face, and her eyes, distant and mist blue, meet Cat's. "Hamburgers sound *great*," she replies, and the enthusiasm in her voice is very real.

It doesn't make Cat feel much better, but she pushes through her evening, feeding them both. They do some homework, watch some TV, and end up snuggling in Cat's bed that night.

For the first time, Sam's kisses are bittersweet, and Cat sleeps poorly with Sam wrapped around her.

They go to school the next day, and everything about the day is routine, from Sam grumbling as she gets out of bed in the morning, to the motorcycle ride to school, to the brief moments in the halls between classes. Sam seems a little distracted, but she's affectionate with Cat, happy to see her.

The only catch is at lunch.

Cat is buying their lunches today, because she offered, because being of service to Sam seems as good a reminder as any for why Sam should want to stay with her. She'd gone out to get in line a little early, along with Tori, while Sam had accompanied Jade to her locker.

But when Jade and Sam pass by them to head toward their regular lunch table, Cat overhears Jade saying, “--got back together a bunch of times after breaking up. That’s what happens--”

That’s all Cat hears, but it’s enough. Sam is clearly asking someone else about the possibility of rekindling things with Carly.

She tries to tell herself she’s being foolish. Jade wouldn’t offer Sam any advice about how to leave Cat. But she also can’t come up with any other reason Sam would be talking to Jade about breaking up and making up repeatedly, the way she and Beck used to function for so long.

For the rest of the day, Cat is distracted, too, which means she and Sam are both a little distant. By the time she’s holding onto Sam on the back of her motorcycle to ride home, Cat is fighting tears, because she’s never felt further away from someone who she’s literally holding onto so tightly.

At that point, Cat’s will to act normal fails her. She’s withdrawn, sulky. At first, it doesn’t matter so much because they’re doing homework, which is difficult for Cat, since she’s distracted by all her dark and frustrated thoughts.

But when Sam seems to have finished her homework, she asks, “What are you thinking for dinner?” It’s a routine question, one that happens most nights, as the two of them exist in their domestically delineated roles, and one of Cat’s is making dinner.

In reply, Cat just shrugs. “I don’t know. Whatever,” she answers. There’s a bit of a bite to her tone that she hasn’t held back as she prepares to try to guard her heart.

Sam frowns. “What’s wrong?” she asks.

Cat scoffs, unable to believe that Sam can even *ask* that with a straight face, and she takes a deep breath. “Just—why are you still here?”

Sam tilts her head a bit in confusion. “I...live here?” she replies, bewildered.

“Until when? Until Carly shows up and you run off with her?” Cat tries to hold it together, but her anger is dissolving quickly into despair as tears spring to her eyes.

“Cat, I—” Sam tries to speak, but Cat doesn’t want to hear her defend herself.

“If you’re just here to have a place to stay until you can leave me, just *go* now.” Cat’s voice cracks, and the heat in her voice dies, and she continues quietly. “You should be with Carly if that’s what you want. I won’t try to stop you. She was your first love, and that’s really special.” Cat knows this, because even as it’s all falling apart around her, she knows she’ll never forget Sam Puckett and how much she loves her, how she knew she was special from almost the moment they met, how she fell in love with her after knowing her for two days, how everything that Sam is—beast, woman, delinquent, puppy, her protector, her *first love*—is seared into Cat’s heart like the press of Sam’s lips seem branded into her skin, forever.

Sam is standing stock still, frozen, staring at Cat, looking like she has no idea what to say.

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Sam *doesn't* know what to say. Because to her, this feels like it comes out of left field, and it's only now, looking at her girlfriend, with tears in her eyes and her own broken heart on her sleeve, that Sam realizes what happened.

When Sam saw that postcard from Carly, her stomach sank, and she felt like her heart had stopped beating for a moment. And looking at Carly's handwriting, reading the words she'd written, reading *I still feel the same*, well...it would be a lie to say that warmth hadn't flooded through Sam at that.

But she also knew, just as strongly as she knew that anything Carly had to say would be bittersweet and joyous and painful all at once, that she wasn't going to take Carly back.

Sam is *happy* with Cat. She feels secure and adored and like she has a *purpose* with Cat. And besides that, Carly had shattered her heart. Even if Sam forgives her (which she *does*) that still doesn't mean she has any desire to rekindle things with the girl who hurt her so thoroughly, she thought she would never recover.

But she had. She *has* recovered. And Cat Valentine had helped put the pieces of her heart back in place, had given her the time and space and affection she needed to learn how to let someone in again.

No, what Sam has been thinking about for the past twenty-four hours is whether or not a friendship with Carly is possible or even something she wants.

Which...of course she wants Carly back in her life. But she worries what the cost will be, what toll it might take to be face to face with the girl who broke her heart. Even if she's moved on, she and Carly have *such* an established dynamic; Sam would always do *anything* for Carly, and what could that even look like now, when Sam's brand of chivalry isn't supposed to be connected to her romantic feelings for Carly? Will she still be tempted, to obey Carly's every whim? Will she still let Carly have that much power over her?

Sam knows it's better to probably cut all contact with Carly, but the other truth is that she *misses* Carly. She's never *stopped* missing her.

Is it worth the risk to find out their friendship can't be even remotely the same, in the wake of their breakup, the heartbreak, the impossibility of rekindling something that she knows Carly still wants?

Maybe it's better to just let them exist with their memories of the love and friendship they shared, and not to open the door to disappointment for them both, for Carly to want what she can't have, for Sam to be confronted with a best friend she can no longer idolize, and a connection that can't possibly be as deep as it used to be.

She'd talked to Jade about her friendship with Beck that day, as she'd wondered whether she should even attempt a reconnection with Carly.

“So, how did you and Beck even get to be such good friends anyway?” Sam had asked as she stood with Jade at her locker, their girlfriends having already split off to get in line to buy lunch.

Jade cracked a smile. “Dating somebody for over three years will do that to you.”

“Yeah, but...you were dating a gay guy.”

“Well *obviously* I know that now, but I didn’t know it then. I thought I loved him.” She closed her locker and started walking next to Sam toward the Asphalt Cafe.

“Thought?”

“I mean, I guess I did love him, in a way. We were much younger when we got together, and I thought love was about...possession. It took me a long time to get over that. And it was hard because he never seemed all that interested in ‘possessing’ me the way I was with him, so I thought he didn’t love me. Which, he *didn’t*, not the way I wanted it anyway.” Jade held open the door for Sam as they stepped out of the cool air-conditioned school and into the afternoon sun.

Sam remembered her own experience of feeling like she had to share Carly with the guys that Carly liked, the ones she felt were the “right” kinds of partners for her, because Carly herself had been too scared of her own queerness to commit to Sam. She could certainly understand the desire to possess someone who didn’t want to be possessed. She wondered if there was something similar to Carly’s situation going on with Beck and Jade, that desire for a partner that “made sense,” even if the partnership itself couldn’t actually work as a romance. “So then, how did you go from that to friendship?” Sam asked, following Jade toward their regular lunch table.

“Well, first I tried to go from that jealous and possessive kind of love to something that was more of a romance. So, yeah, we broke up a lot, because we fought a lot. But then we got back together a bunch of times after breaking up. That’s what happens when neither of you knows what you want or how to get it.”

“I guess I can relate to that,” Sam admitted.

“I finally felt like I could trust him when he came back to me after being broken up for months, but when we tried to focus on the romance, it just...wasn’t there.” Jade sat at the table, eyes still on Sam as she spoke. “We were passionless. And I *wanted* passion, and I wanted it with *him*, because, I mean, I actually did love him, or at least who I thought he was. But it was like as soon as I figured that out, there was absolutely no way for us to access that passion. And then we agreed to break up because we both agreed that it felt more like a friendship than a relationship.”

“So you just kind of naturally shifted into friendship?”

“Sure,” Jade shrugged. “Once I got over feeling bad about the breakup, we just hung out like normal, just without any kissing or anything else. Spending all our time together for years let us figure out all the things we liked to do together, so we could still do all that, just without

all the complications of trying to fit together in ways that didn't work. Then he told me he was gay, and it all kinda clicked. And then I got together with Tori and realized what it was like to be in a relationship where passion *wasn't* a problem." She smirked.

Sam smirked back. "I know what you mean." She realized how lucky she was to have had two relationships now that were both full of passion, but mostly, she was thinking about how much attention she'd paid to Cat's nipples over the past month or so, trying to produce a repeat of that orgasm that had taken them both by surprise.

Jade gave her an appraising look, and looked like she was about to ask something that Sam probably didn't want to answer about her sex life with Cat—or what it amounted to, anyway, when they hadn't had sex yet—but they were joined by Beck and Robbie, who were playfully arguing over whose senior portrait was cuter. Jade rolled her eyes at them, but Sam could tell it was affectionate exasperation.

But as she considered what Jade had told her, she realized that the friendship Beck and Jade had built had a very, very different foundation from any kind of friendship she and Carly could attempt now. Beck and Jade had completely burnt through any semblance of desire between them before they'd transitioned to friendship. With Carly, it seemed very clear to Sam that there was still a lot lingering between them. There was no closure, no satisfying end to their connection, only lingering emotion, unspoken words, a void they both wished to fill.

But *still*. As clear as it was that this *really* wasn't a good idea, Sam was tempted. And for the rest of the day, she wrestled with that temptation.

Maybe it made her seem a little cold and distant to Cat. It wasn't her intention, she was just distracted, but she'd been happy to see Cat all day.

Maybe it wasn't enough. Because when Cat got angry, and then sad, and ordered her to just leave her for Carly already, it took Sam completely by surprise. Because for all that she's been thinking about Carly since she got that postcard, it was *never* because she was thinking of leaving Cat.

Sam needs to make this clear. "Come here," she says to Cat in a quiet voice.

"Why?" Cat asks in a tone that suggests she's preparing to be hurt.

"Just come sit with me," Sam asks. When Cat doesn't move, she adds, "Please?"

Maybe because it's a word Sam doesn't use much, Cat rises from the dining nook and walks across the room to join Sam on the couch. Her body is angled toward Sam, but her face is turned away, toward the blank TV screen. Her expression looks *devastated*, and it makes Sam's stomach feel heavy with hurt.

Sam takes both of Cat's hands in her own. They're limp, unresponsive, like Cat doesn't want to give her *anything* right now. Sam starts to explain what happened. "When I said that I didn't know what I was going to tell Carly, I never meant that I was going to take her back."

Cat's eyes shift slightly to look at her, though her face is still averted. She doesn't reply for a long moment, then finally asks, "Then what was that supposed to mean?"

"I've been spending the day trying to decide if I could be her friend again," Sam explains, taking her time with each word, wanting to make sure Cat doesn't misunderstand anything she says. "It was never about *leaving* you. I didn't consider that for a minute."

Gradually, Cat begins to turn more toward her. "It wasn't?"

"Of course not!" Sam replies emphatically. "I want *you*, Cat. I'm *so happy* with you. Why would I ever just toss that aside?"

"Because...it's *Carly*," Cat says, as if this alone is reason enough, but she continues. "I know how important she is to you. You were so close, you understood each other in a way you and I can't even experience. You *loved* her!" That final detail seems to be the one that sticks with Cat the most, from the way she says it so emphatically, but then presses her mouth together and turns away again, trying to pull her hands from Sam's, but Sam keeps her hold on Cat's hands.

"I did," Sam agrees, and hesitates, but decides she has to be honest, with Cat and with herself. "And a part of me always will love her," she admits softly. "She was my first love, the single most important person in my life for years. I thought she was the love of my life. That's not something I think I can ever really leave behind."

"Then why *wouldn't* you want to be with her?" Cat asks, frowning now, looking almost *irritated* with Sam for telling her all of this.

"Because I choose you," Sam says simply.

"But...I'm...I'm just *me*." Cat doesn't seem to know how to articulate whatever response she's trying to make.

"Yeah, that's the point. It's you I want," Sam tells her. She takes a deep breath, and finally voices the thing she's known for so long, but hasn't been able to bring herself to put into words. "I love you, Cat," she utters, her voice cracking and almost dying as she says the words. She swallows, trying to make her throat work again, and is shocked to feel tears in her eyes. "I've loved you for long enough to be scared about it," she whispers. "And I choose you. I'll always choose you. I promise."

As Sam blinks away the tears in her eyes, she can see that Cat is facing her now, can feel the way the hands in hers grip her back, finally responsive, watches the way Cat's expression slowly brightens, gradually shifts from misery to delight, even though there's still a shade of caution in her eyes. "You do? You really love me?" Cat asks, voice hopeful and a little stunned, like this is not at all where she thought this conversation would go.

"Of course I do," Sam huffs out a humorless chuckle. "Why else would I want to be near you all the time? Or want to protect you so much? Why else would I have tried to stop you from jumping over those tuna fish for me? Or gotten you that jump rope you mentioned one time?"

“You’ve loved me for that long?” Cat asks in awe.

“I told you. Long enough for it to scare me.” Sam watches her curiously. “I didn’t think it would be this shocking.”

“It’s not, I guess,” Cat replies. “I just didn’t know for sure. I hoped…” she trails off, “I hoped for a long time.”

“How long?” Sam asks, keenly curious.

Cat bites her lip, dark eyes looking shy and coy as she finally utters, “I’ve loved you since the day you brought home the furniture from the set of *That’s a Drag* and made us a home.”

Sam stares, feeling her jaw go a little slack. “You’ve loved me for that long?” she echoes Cat’s earlier inquiry.

Cat nods slowly. “I’ve dreamed of this for a long time,” she admits.

Sam remembers how it felt to love Carly for so long, to have to wait for her to catch up, the ache of an unrequited connection, at least outside of the full moon. She hates herself for making Cat wait so long for this, for something they both needed to hear, needed to express. “I wish I’d had the courage to say it sooner,” Sam whispers.

Cat draws her close, wrapping her arms around her. “You said it at exactly the right time,” she murmurs, kissing Sam’s shoulder, her neck, her cheek. “It helps me know you’ll always choose me,” she whispers.

“I promise,” Sam repeats, meaning it.

Maybe she can’t control who love draws her to, who she might fall for. But Sam knows she can choose who she focuses that love on, who she cultivates it with, who she chooses to grow with. And that seems far more valuable and meaningful than the arbitrary emotion that pulls two people together.

And she knows she’ll always choose Cat Valentine without regrets.

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Cat is elated to finally have the confirmation of feelings she’d suspected existed for so long, to *know* that the love she thought she’d felt from Sam for so long was real, and present, and powerful. She wants to *wallow* in it, to let it consume her, to let them both express it in the most primal ways possible.

But the emotional whiplash of the afternoon, of being certain Sam was about to leave her for Carly to finding out that Sam instead made a promise to always choose her, well. It leaves Cat a little bit emotionally raw. She needs affection, she needs reassurance—not necessarily verbal, because Sam made her a *promise*, and she knows Sam always keeps those—but physical. Cat wants to be snuggled and held for the rest of the night, close to Sam’s heart, her strong arms around her, keeping her safe.

She keeps replaying the words in her mind, of Sam promising to always choose her. She knows what promises mean to Sam, knows she only makes promises she intends to keep. It's part of her moral code, it's something she takes pride in. Sam keeps her promises. And Cat knows that the certainty of Sam's promise is as potent as any other commitment. She knows it will be Sam's north star, something that guides her decisions, that Sam will renew her promise to choose Cat over and over again.

And Cat is going to do her best to make sure that it's never something Sam has to do out of obligation, or duty. Cat wants to make sure it's something Sam continues to do because she *wants* to, that she'll do it out of the love they share.

But for now, after a delicious dinner, Cat falls asleep on Sam's chest as Sam holds her on the couch. It's been an exhausting day.

She wakes up to Sam trying to lift her up. "What're you doing?" she slurs sleepily.

"Taking you to bed," Sam grunts.

Cat loves it when Sam lifts her up. It's happened a few times since they've known each other. But this time just makes Cat giggle because it feels so weird for Sam to lift her and cradle her this way. "I can walk," Cat insists.

"I can carry you," Sam counters, but then she relaxes her grip, allowing Cat's feet to touch the floor. The hardwood is cool against her bare feet, and she regrets asking Sam to put her down, but then Sam's arm tucks around her shoulder, and Cat nuzzles against her and they walk back to the bedroom pressed together.

They take turns getting ready for bed in the bathroom, which wakes Cat up a little, but she's still yawning as Sam joins her in her bed, encouraging her to lay on her side so that Sam can spoon up against her.

"Good night," Cat murmurs, "I love you."

Just getting to *say* it out loud, three little words she's kept tucked in her heart for over half a year, is enough to start a fluttering warmth in her chest.

But it's nothing compared to the way that sensation turns to tingling all down her limbs when she hears it repeated back to her.

"I love you," Sam says quietly, pressing a kiss against her shoulder. "Good night."

Unlike the night before, Cat sleeps better than ever with Sam pressed against her, holding her close, even when she snores in Cat's ear.

The next day goes far better. Cat wakes up feeling refreshed, and though Sam grumbles when the alarm goes off, it quickly turns to a grin when Cat greets her with a press of lip and a, "Good morning. I love you." She wonders if she'll ever get tired of saying it. She doesn't want it to ever lose its potency, and right now, it's like she has thousands of moments when she'd *thought* it still saved up in her heart, and she's letting them all out now, one by one, still

working through all the little pieces of their history that led them here, together, waking up in bed to go to school together.

“God, I love you,” is Sam’s response to Cat’s good morning greeting. She sounds awed as she speaks, more expressive than usual in her early-morning groggy state.

It’s so unfair that they have to get up and go to school, because Cat wishes she could take her time with Sam right now, see what else she might say as she wakes up and Cat kisses her, touches her, gives her more evidence of love.

But instead, they get up, get dressed and ready, Sam has some coffee, they eat breakfast, and then they climb onto Sam’s motorcycle to head to Hollywood to go to school.

Cat has a bit of trouble paying attention today, but for the exact opposite reason. Well, sort of. It’s because she’s thinking about Sam, but not because she’s scared of leaving her. Because she knows Sam *loves* her. Cat is thinking a lot about what that means. It’s a good thing she already knows where she’s going to college, so it doesn’t really matter if she zones out here and there right now. She’d gotten into a few programs in the city, but she’s decided to go to community college first, both to save money and because she still doesn’t know what she wants to focus on for her future. How is anyone supposed to decide that at seventeen? Well, except that all her friends seem to be pretty set on their career paths. But Cat doesn’t mind taking some time to evaluate her options and decide what she really wants.

It’s also the first night of the full moon. Cat hadn’t really forgotten, but it comes up during morning break, at Jade’s locker.

“What are you two up to tonight?” Tori asks Sam and Cat as Jade shuffles books around.

Sam glances at Cat and shrugs. “We were going to have a wolf night in,” she replies. That’s what they’d decided on earlier in the week. It’s a Wednesday, and Tori and Sam are planning to spend the night in Shadow Creek Park on Friday, so they’d figured they should let Sam be a wolf at least one other night that month.

“Us, too,” Jade replies.

“Want to come over?” Tori suggests. “Could be fun to all have a wolf night together at my house.”

It would be fun. Cat knows that even if they’re all staying local for college, it doesn’t mean they’re going to have time to do this sort of thing in the future. There may not be a lot of opportunities for wolf nights for the four of them in a few months. Besides, if she’s going to spend the evening with Sam as a wolf, they might as well be with their friends.

She glances at Sam, who nods and says, “Yeah, that sounds great. Let’s hang out tonight. I’ll run home and get us a change of clothes after lunch.”

Everything about the day is better. They have plans to look forward to that night. They have a great time with their friends at lunch, laughing at the story Beck tells about meeting Robbie’s

grandmother, harmonizing with Andre for fun as he tries to work on a new song, all the while sitting pressed together, enjoying their closeness.

And after school, Cat and Tori stay late in the music room to further help Andre with his new song, so Jade and Sam stay with them, being thoroughly distracting as they sit across the room and laugh at Splashface videos together. Afterwards, the group goes to Nozu for an early sushi dinner. After Andre gets into his car, Tori waves to Sam and Cat as they all head to their respective vehicles. "I'll see you at my house!"

"We'll be there in a little bit," Sam replies, "Have to take care of a couple of things first."

"We do?" Cat asks as they split off toward Sam's motorcycle.

"Yep," Sam says succinctly, and doesn't elaborate.

Cat eyes her curiously, but Sam doesn't reveal any more as they settle onto the motorcycle, and it roars to life between them. Cat wraps her arms around Sam, and they're off.

Sam doesn't go far, and a few minutes later pulls up in front of a convenience store. "What are we buying?" Cat asks.

"I just have to grab something," Sam says. "You want anything?"

"I don't think so," Cat replies, but she follows Sam inside anyway.

Sam moves right for the tiny rack of postcards near the register, peruses them briefly, and chooses one. She steps over to the cashier. "You sell stamps?" she asks. She glances back at Cat as the cashier retrieves her stamp. "Find anything you need?" she asks.

"No," Cat replies, watching as Sam pays for her postcard and walks out. Cat realizes now how focused Sam is since she didn't buy any snacks or even a root beer along with her postcard. Sure, she just ate sushi, but she's still *Sam*. "Sam, what's this about?" she asks as they step outside.

"I'm writing to Carly," Sam replies. She pulls a pen from her backpack and leans over the seat of her motorcycle, already beginning to write a message on the back of the postcard.

"Oh," Cat replies. She can't quite make out what Sam is writing and it feels rude to lean closer. "What are you saying?" she asks.

Sam doesn't reply for a long moment as she finishes writing on the postcard, including the address, apparently from memory, then peels her stamp off of its sticker back and places it in the corner of the postcard. Finally, she says, "I'm telling her she can do whatever she wants, but we won't be reconnecting. That I've moved on and I'm happy." She gazes at Cat for a moment. "You can read it if you want."

But for the first time, Cat doesn't feel the pull of a secret, compelling her to be curious. Not after yesterday, and not after Sam told her what she'd written. "That's okay," she shakes her head.

Sam nods, then looks around. “See a mailbox around here?” she asks.

Cat gazes around herself and sees one down the block and points. Sam starts hurrying toward it, Cat at her heels, and she watches as Sam drops the postcard into the mailbox, the mailbox chute swinging shut after it with a clang. Sam turns to Cat with a very satisfied expression on her face.

The walk back to Sam’s motorcycle is much slower, and Cat feels herself filled up with the same sensation as yesterday, that giddy joy of the assurance of Sam’s love, her action of sending that postcard just as powerful as hearing the words themselves.

It makes Cat ache in a different way, and she gazes at Sam as they walk. “Sam?” she asks.

“Hmm?” Sam replies, looking at her and smiling softly.

“I think I’m ready.”

Sam blinks and stops walking, clearly knowing exactly what Cat means but not wanting to say it, for fear that she’s misinterpreted. “Ready?” she asks.

Cat nods, biting her bottom lip. “Ready to make love to you,” she clarifies.

Sam stares at her for a long moment, and Cat can see her chest rise with the deep breaths she takes. Finally, she says, “Text Tori. Tell her something came up and we have to bail.”

“Yeah?” Cat asks, giggling.

“Yeah. We’re going home,” Sam says decisively, and breaks into a run back to her motorcycle.

Glowing all over, Cat follows her, climbing onto the bike with her and shrieking in joy as Sam revs the engine and speeds off.

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[A postcard depicting digital art. In the foreground are the shadows of low trees and tall palm trees in front of a cityscape of skyscrapers in front of two layers of rolling purple hills, with the letters “Hollywood” standing out brightly. The top of the postcard reads “Greetings from Los Angeles”]

Carly

You should do whatever you want. I’m not going to ask you not to come to LA. But I need you to know that we can’t be friends, or anything else. I’ve moved on. Her name is Cat and she makes me so happy, and I’ve found friends who support me. I still care about you a lot. I always will. But I think it’s best if we just let it be, just enjoy the memories we have, of being best friends and of being in love, and accept that things will never be that way again. I really wish you the best, and I hope you can be happy for me.

Sam

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Though the urgency of getting home as soon as possible is just about the only thing Sam can focus on as she weaves her motorcycle through traffic, she's not being reckless. She wouldn't dare, not with precious cargo like Cat clinging to her on the back of her vehicle. But it's a more thrilling ride than usual, as evidenced by Cat's squeals of laughter as they ride together. Sam grins, acutely aware of the arms around her waist, the press of Cat against her back, the sound of her laughter in her ear. She's the most vibrant creature Sam has ever met, and they *love* each other, and they're about to go home and express that to each other *very* physically.

It's late in the afternoon, and while Tori's house is only a few minutes away from Hollywood Arts and Nozu, Sam and Cat live across town, in Venice. Though Sam can navigate a lot of traffic snarls more easily than cars on her bike, the sun is still lower in the sky than she'd like when they make it home.

Because, oh yeah, the other thing that puts the thrill of exhilaration (and, okay, maybe some fear) in Sam is that she is acutely aware, all the way home, that she hasn't taken any wolfsbane yet today. Because the whole *plan* was to *not* take it.

They park behind the house, but before Sam can get very far, Cat grabs her and pushes her up against the patio door and kisses her, hands slipping under her jacket, fingers grasping at her shirt.

For a moment, all thought leaves Sam's brain, replaced by the certainty of *sex*, as Cat kisses her slowly, thoroughly, wringing out all rationality from Sam and filling her body with tingling heat. But a minute or so later, Sam finally pulls away. "Wolfsbane," she manages to pant.

"Hmm?" Cat asks as she trails kisses along Sam's jaw.

"Gotta take wolfsbane," Sam repeats.

Cat draws away reluctantly, blinking. "Oh. Yeah, that's pretty important."

"Yeah." Sam takes a breath and pulls away even more reluctantly, pulling off her leather jacket as she draws back. "Yeah, I'll be..." she trails off, tosses her jacket in the general direction of the chair by the back door, and then bolts back to the bedroom.

A wild part of her hopes Cat chases her, which tells her just how close to the surface the wolf is right now. Yeah, a capsule would be cutting it too close. She remembers the tincture she'd gotten from Astra as a bonus for being a new customer at the wolfsbane dispensary. Liquid wolfsbane, like tinctures and teas, is fast-acting. Spencer always had a couple of tea bags around in case of emergencies, but Sam has really only ever taken capsules. Well, time to try something new.

She fishes the little white pharmacy bag out of her sock drawer and pulls out the glass vial. It's small, something she could easily lose if she isn't careful. She reads the label; she doesn't need to take too much wolfsbane and be out of her mind for the next week. The vial has a full

moon's worth of tincture inside of it, and instructions for how much liquid to place under the tongue. Sam hurriedly fills the eyedropper and drips the wolfsbane tincture into her mouth.

She's heard wolfsbane isn't exactly the most appetizing plant, but had never tasted it, since the capsules contained any flavor. But it's bitter, and strong. Probably because it's poisonous to humans and the sense of taste of werewolves is largely similar to their human cousins. Sam feels her mouth salivating as a reaction and moves her tongue around, trying to dissipate the flavor. No wonder wolfsbane brownies exist. Maybe she should try them next time. Sounds more fun than swallowing a pill or struggling through a tincture.

She opens her minifridge and gulps down half of a root beer to wash down the flavor, and luckily, that goes a long way toward making the bitter taste disappear. And now, her wolf contained, Sam can refocus on the prospect of imminent *sex*.

She hurries up front to find that Cat has drawn all the shades to ensure their privacy, and she's on her phone. Sam comes up behind her, one hand slipping around her waist, the other shifting her hair behind her shoulder so that Sam can begin kissing along her neck. "What're you up to?" she asks between kisses.

Cat sighs softly, head tilting in reaction, but she's still tapping away at her phone. "I forgot to tell Tori that we're bailing."

Sam chuckles. "What're you telling her?"

"Just that something came up, like you said. We'll see them tomorrow."

"Something sure did 'come up'," Sam laughs softly at her innuendo.

"Sam!" Cat sounds more disappointed than affronted.

"Yeah, sorry." She nuzzles Cat's neck. "The only thing that's going up is my love for you," she husks.

Cat turns in her arms, looking like she's fighting a smile. "That's...even worse."

"I know," Sam grins sheepishly. "My brain isn't working very well."

Cat tilts her head, feigning innocence. "Why would that be?" she asks, batting her eyelashes.

It makes Sam groan. "Don't tease."

"Then don't be vulgar." They both pause for a long moment, gazing at each other, smiles growing, until Cat says, "I think we're asking too much of each other."

"Yeah," Sam laughs. "Good thing I actually like it when you tease."

"And maybe I kind of like it when you're a little...rough," Cat admits, choosing her words carefully.

"Yeah?" Sam asks, smirk deepening.

“Within reason,” Cat replies, her tone mildly prim, but there’s a wicked smile behind her eyes that tells Sam there’s a *lot* about Cat’s appetites waiting to be discovered.

Good thing they’re on the brink of some discovery right now.

Sam kisses her again, and now Cat melts against her, flush with her body, as she kisses her back. She draws away a moment later, humming. “You taste like root beer.”

“Well, I just had some. To wash down the wolfsbane.”

Cat kisses her again. “I like it,” she murmurs.

Sam grins against her lips as they kiss more, hands at Cat’s shoulders. She’d taken off her jacket when Sam had gone into the bedroom, so now Sam’s fingers are on her cardigan, working to push it down her arms, while Cat’s hands settle just above Sam’s waist, her touch steady, certain, warm even through Sam’s t-shirt.

She manages to coax Cat’s cardigan off of her shoulders, and watches as Cat drops it carelessly on the floor. Her heart thrums faster, understanding the action as an indication of Cat’s headspace, which appears to be...very goal-driven toward sex right now. Well, Sam can relate to that. As if she’s really thought of anything else since Cat mentioned it.

She draws Cat back in for more kisses. They’re getting more intense, fiercer, passion ramping up between them. Sam is still kind of letting Cat take the lead, remembering losing her own virginity, with Carly, how they’d both wanted everything so much, yet it was still hard to initiate, still difficult to put their old desires into new, unfamiliar action. She figures Cat must be feeling a lot of the same kind of emotion, and wants to give her all the time she needs to be ready for this.

Cat does appear to be taking her time, a little, but she’s not moving at a glacial pace. In fact, it’s not long before she has hands at the hem of Sam’s t-shirt and is drawing it up over her torso, preparing to pull it over her head.

Sam draws back from the kiss enough to allow Cat to remove it, and as they surge back together to keep kissing, Sam feels the effect of her wolfsbane, very abruptly and very potently.

Usually, with her capsules, she takes them hours before the change, so the medicine is all absorbed by the time the change is supposed to take place, but with the tincture, the absorption is fast, and Sam feels it like an unfamiliar tingle down her body, similar to the sensation that precedes the change, but the inverse of it, somehow. She knows she’s not about to change. There’s no sense of anticipation at the edge of her awareness that always signals her changes. There’s just...the more potent signs of the wolfsbane suppressing her shapeshifting as it absorbs quickly into her body.

And there’s the sense of the wolf’s instincts and senses, just at the edge of her awareness. More of the wolf than normally appears when she takes wolfsbane. A sliver of it, like the sliver of the moon, shining through, giving her a burst of energy that seems to transform directly into desire.

Before Sam knows it, she's wrested control of the situation from Cat, reclaims the power she'd ceded to her, and has Cat pushed up against the back of the couch. She's standing between Cat's legs, one of Sam's hands on Cat's thigh, holding her leg up and encouraging it to curl around Sam's waist. Cat's other leg keeps her balanced on the ground, and Sam's other hand holds her lower back as they kiss.

Sam feels her hand start to slide up the outside of Cat's thigh, making her whine as it dips beneath the hem of her skirt, and Sam pulls away, realizing she should slow down. "Sorry," she pants, "I think my wolfsbane just hit. Hard," she explains.

"That's okay," Cat says breathlessly, lips kiss-swollen, eyes heavy-lidded as she gazes up at Sam hazily. "I did say I like when you're a little rough," Cat reminds her.

Sam swallows hard, and says in a low voice, "Maybe don't tell me that when the wolf is so close to the surface."

"Why?" Cat asks cheekily, "Are you going to *eat* me, big bad wolf?"

Heat ignites through Sam, and she inhales sharply at the suggestion, blood roaring in her ears, until the last thing Cat says finally catches up with her and a smile cracks through her expression, and then she's laughing. "Okay, you did *not* just call me that."

Cat shrugs, "Why not? It's true." But now, Sam has stepped back enough that Cat has both feet on the ground, no longer half-balanced on the back of the couch. Sam watches in awe as she signals her willingness to proceed by taking off her own shirt, standing before Sam in her pink skirt, pink bra and little cute pink shoes.

Maybe Sam has never given pink a fair shake. After all, it looks *great* on Cat.

But before Sam can reach for her and start kissing her again, Cat walks right past her, toward the hallway to the bedroom. "Coming?" she asks, shooting a smirk over her shoulder.

"You gonna make me?" Sam growls back, smirking at her own innuendo.

But instead of scolding her, Cat doesn't miss a beat as she replies, "That's the plan," and starts hurrying toward the bedroom.

Sam doesn't waste any time hustling after her, and by the time they burst through the bedroom door, she's fully chasing Cat, and overtakes her just inside the bedroom, wrapping her arms around her from behind, and they laugh together, feeling the warmth of the skin of their torsos as they playfully grab at each other, until they're back to kissing again, in the middle of the room, Cat just over on Sam's side of the room, Sam standing on the soft, pink carpet on Cat's side.

It's much more difficult now to hold back and let Cat set the pace. Sam keeps her hands busy, one on Cat's chest, fingers grasping at her breast over her bra, the other sliding up the outside of Cat's thigh and then shifting back to grab her ass beneath her skirt. The contact makes Cat gasp and groan against Sam's lips, and that's reward enough for now, as Sam struggles not to escalate too quickly.

Between her own enthusiastic responses to Sam's hands, though, Cat's hands are working, too, moving from Sam's bra and down her stomach to her zipper, fumbling there, almost certainly too nervous and aroused and excited to be smooth about it. Sam steps back a little to give Cat more room to maneuver, and Cat pushes back against her, walking Sam back toward her bed as they kiss.

Moments later, Sam finds herself seated on the edge of Cat's bed, looking up at her, her pants half open and Cat smirking down at her. She can't come up with anything to say other than, "Hey."

"Take off your shoes," Cat points to them, standing there half dressed. It's difficult to look away from her, her slightly mussed hair, the delicious expanse of exposed skin on her torso, her crooked skirt, a visual reminder that Sam's hands were just underneath it, and will be again soon.

She'd almost forgotten that Cat had asked her to do something. "What?" she asks, as Cat stares at her expectantly, then she remembers. "Oh." She reaches down and begins tugging at the laces of her boots.

"Can't take your pants off with your shoes on," Cat comments, casually toeing off her pink ballet flats.

Sam can't even come up with a snarky reply about Cat wanting to take her pants off, because she's too eager for it to happen to tease about it. Instead, she tugs her boots off and tosses them in the general direction of her laundry chair, and sits a little bit more forward onto the edge of the bed, and reaches for Cat's hips, drawing her closer, until Cat is standing just in front of her.

Sam nuzzles at her taut belly, making Cat giggle softly, and then presses kisses all along it, too slow and gentle to tickle, listening for the way Cat's breath catches and she sighs in pleasure.

Sam wants so much she feels like she might burst with the effort of pacing herself when all she wants to do is toss Cat onto the bed and have her way with her, but she keeps her movements slow, deliberate, even as her tongue traces patterns over Cat's stomach. Because Sam's hands are moving along the waistband of Cat's skirt, searching until she finds the little button and zipper that keep the garment from slipping off of Cat entirely.

Cat doesn't object at all to Sam unzipping her skirt, and Sam slowly guides it down Cat's thighs, thinking it will be more sensual than just letting it *drop*, and kisses and licks along Cat's hip bone as the skin is revealed, prompting one of Cat's hands to clutch at the back of Sam's head. Sam isn't sure if it's encouragement or hesitation that prompts Cat's reaction, so she gazes up at her, reverting to simple kisses as their eyes meet.

Cat's eyes are dark and warm, her mouth tugged up in a lazy grin. She blinks a few times, long lashes fluttering gently, and Sam sees her tongue run over her lips, a quick motion accompanied by a deep breath, as Cat seems to consider what is next.

And it seems she decides to step out of her skirt on the floor and push gently at Sam's shoulder, encouraging her to sit back further on the bed, so she can start tugging Sam's pants down her legs. Sam is abruptly struck by the memory of Carly, kneeling in front of her to do this very thing, the first night they made love, and feels her heart throb. She loves that she will have this memory of Cat, not to replace the one with Carly, because that will always be with her, but to recontextualize it, to know that the last time a woman had undressed her that way, it was Cat.

It would always be Cat, because Sam meant it when she promised to always choose Cat. Cat would never not be the best choice she could make. The choice that would make her happiest, the most secure, the most loved.

Sam is not a total romantic. She knows that Cat isn't the only possible person in the world she can love so fully. Carly is proof enough of that, and Sam knows that in theory there are plenty of other women out there she could love deeply and wonderfully. But she simply can't imagine finding someone else like Cat, who loves so passionately, who accepts Sam for who she is, who takes care of her and, most importantly, who wants to *stay* with her, to grow alongside her, together, not apart. Who isn't going to leave her to seek her own path, who wants Sam to be a part of her future, not someone she holds at arm's length, waiting in the wings.

She can't blame Carly, for wanting what she wanted, for the choices she made that broke them up. In fact, maybe she'll send Carly another postcard, to thank her, for loving Sam enough to let her go and seek her own future, with Cat.

Thoughts of Carly all but vanish as Cat kicks Sam's discarded jeans aside and climbs onto her lap, straddling her thighs, with both of them in just bras and underwear (Cat's match, Sam's don't). It's so chaste, and so Cat, but also the most erotic thing Sam has ever seen. She lets her hands skim down Cat's sides, settling on her waist, as Cat loops her arms around Sam's neck and kisses her harder, shifting even closer, Sam feeling how hot *all* Cat's skin is, against her own.

And as much as Sam noted the way Cat's fingers shook as she fumbled with Sam's pants, her own hands can barely unhook Cat's bra, in part because it's so hard to focus, with everything feeling so incredible, with anticipation making her stomach twist and turn, like a deliciously wanton version of hunger. Once Cat's bra is tossed aside, Sam lets her mouth continue its work all over Cat's torso, mapping skin she has become very familiar with over the past month or so as she's attempted to replicate the nipple orgasm that took them both by surprise.

She can feel Cat's thighs flex as she shifts, groaning at the sensation of Sam's mouth on her breasts, making breathy little cries at the swirls of Sam's tongue or the gentle pressure of her teeth. Soon she's leaning so hard into Sam that she's inclined to lean back and pull Cat on top of her, but she knows there isn't really room, not with the way they're sitting at the edge of the bed.

So instead, Sam grabs Cat by her hips and shifts her onto the bed next to her, Cat giggling and squealing and she ends up with her head on her pillows, looking up at Sam, who shifts to face her.

And reaches for the waistband of the last piece of clothing Cat is wearing, the pink cotton underpants.

She looks up at Cat, then, wanting to connect with her, to check in, before they progress any further. Wanting some sort of confirmation, consent, before she has Cat completely nude in front of her.

Cat's eyes are glittering, her mouth is parted eagerly, and her grin only widens as Sam looks up at her. "Take them off," Cat finally says, when Sam lingers, and Sam swallows hard and watches as her own trembling fingers draw the underwear down lean, smooth legs.

And there is Cat, reclining nude on her bed, on top of her pink bedspread, legs together, crossed elegantly at the ankle, red hair fanning out on the pillow behind her. Sam takes her in, takes in all her nude flesh, the way she poses, tasteful, not lewd, letting Sam look at all of her. Sam is aware that she's been naked in front of Cat many times, even before they ever dated, but this is the first time she's seen so much of Cat, and it's *significant*. Cat can be so modest, so demure, Sam feels so lucky to be able to see her this way, for Cat to trust her with her body like this.

It's a different sort of intimacy than sex itself. Sam has heard of people who have sex with as many clothes on as possible, to mitigate their own feelings about their body. But Cat is clearly comfortable in her skin, even if she seems so proper when it comes to things like nudity; she'd always changed clothes in private even when Sam would just strip down without a care in front of Cat in their shared bedroom. And here, finally, she's letting Sam really *see* her, and as much as Sam wants to touch her, she can do nothing but take her time in the moment, holding the gift of Cat's nudity like a butterfly in her palms, delicately, appreciating the joy of being chosen by such an exquisite and beautiful creature.

But finally, Sam leans over and kisses her. "You're gorgeous," she purrs, and then, because she's Sam, she has to rephrase it in a way that feels more genuine, "So fucking sexy."

Cat laughs and reaches up to draw Sam back down to kiss her again. Sam leans on one arm as they continue kissing, her other hand moving down Cat's body. Now that they're back to kissing, Sam's *need* is growing stronger, and it's reflected in the way she grasps at Cat's breast, making her gasp, and runs nails down her side. She tries to be soft about it, but she knows, from the moan she feels echoing inside her mouth, that she's gone a little harder than intended, and soothes the path her nails took with a gentle press of her palm before continuing her trajectory down Cat's body. She reaches Cat's hip bone and upper thigh, and Cat pulls away. "Wait," she utters softly.

Sam lifts herself up to better look at Cat, worrying she's done something wrong, maybe been *too* rough with her in her haste. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Cat's grin returns, shyer this time. "I just want you to be naked, too."

Sam smiles in response, in relief and eagerness, and she lifts herself to kneel in front of Cat to take her bra off, watching the way Cat's eyes widen as she takes in Sam's body, even though Sam knows there's nothing new about her nudity to Cat, it certainly doesn't feel that way, with the way dark eyes consume her.

The underwear is a little more difficult, because Sam wants to remain on the bed with Cat, but she shifts to the foot of the bed, adjusting her legs and leaning back just next to Cat's feet to tug her underwear off and toss it onto the floor, and then she turns, as nude as Cat, and climbs on top of her once again.

Cat places a hand on her shoulder, halting her briefly, as she looks down at their naked bodies, just inches apart, and seems to take that in with a deep breath. Then she looks back up at Sam and pulls her back down for another kiss.

And this time, Sam lets her weight settle on top of Cat, and feels their bodies connect, skin on skin, legs intertwining. Sam hears a groan as they press together and realizes belated that it comes from her own throat.

It feels like the interconnection of their bodies satisfies some deep, primal desire within Sam, one she wasn't fully aware of and can't even really articulate. Because despite the nudity, the way their limbs are situated, this isn't *sex*. No one is grinding, or humping, or chasing release. But it's *intimacy*. A certain kind of full-body intimacy that feels like another significant first, the baring and pressing of flesh as a conduit for some kind of merging of souls. If there is such a thing. Sam doesn't know. But she does know how *good* it feels, absent even any kind of eroticism.

But eroticism isn't forgotten, because they're still kissing, and one of Cat's hands drifts down to grab Sam's ass, and Sam doesn't want to wait any longer to give Cat pleasure. She lifts herself up slightly, shifting her weight onto one arm again, and this time, her hand starts at Cat's hip, fingers drifting to her inner thigh.

She feels Cat shift beneath her, parting her legs wider. She kisses Cat's shoulder, eyes closed, concentrating on her hand as she lets her fingers trail up, passing over every bit of skin, until she finds heat, and wetness, and groans in unison with Cat's breathy whimper.

Sam lifts her head, wanting to see Cat's expression as Sam touches her for the first time. As *someone else* touches Cat for the first time, a brand new experience they're immersed in together. Sam lets her fingers wander, but it isn't long before she draws Cat into the experience, murmuring, "How do you like it, when you touch yourself?" The question confronts her with the image of Cat doing *exactly* that, and it only redoubles Sam's lust.

She feels Cat's hand join her, guiding her movements, applying more pressure, until Cat seems satisfied and draws her hand away. "Like that," she gasps, "Oh, just like that," she moans, eyes closing, head tipping back as Sam follows the instructions she's been given. She's being gentle, but focused, very deliberate with her motions, watching Cat, when she isn't leaning down to press kisses against her chest.

Sam wants to do more. She wants to explore *everything* with Cat. But for now, she's keeping this very simple, exactly what Cat requests, and hopes it will be enough.

But Cat's brow furrows after some time passes. "More," she pleads.

The word sends a spark of thrill through Sam, and she remembers the way Cat said she *liked* when Sam got a little rough. She remembers the beginning of the encounter, when it felt like

the wolf took over, and she wonders what might happen if she let it out right now, when Cat wants more. “You sure that’s what you want?” Sam growls.

Cat’s entire body trembles. “Yes,” she moans.

Sam lifts herself up more, giving herself more leverage, and already, it changes the intensity of the motion of her hand. She’s moving faster, with more pressure. She buries her face in Cat’s chest, too, letting her instincts and memories of so many previous nights guide the way she kisses and licks all over the skin of Cat’s breasts, and even nibbles, lets her teeth scrape against the swell of her breasts. She’s listening carefully, giddy with the emotions she can sense with every part of her wolf’s brain, redolent in the scent of Cat’s skin, in the sound of her cries, in the way her body shakes beneath Sam’s, her hips jerking and lifting to meet her hand. The taste of her skin, like a delicacy, the way when Sam gazes up at her, through the mess of the blonde hair in her face, she can see Cat looking down at her, jaw dropped, eyes full of passion and need and desire.

“I’m so close,” Cat moans.

Sam’s only possible response is something between a growl and a groan as she redoubles her efforts, fingers swirling, tongue lashing and teeth tugging at Cat’s nipple. It makes her keen, a sound that almost makes Sam want to join her cry, but it only lasts for a moment before Cat’s trembling turns to shaking turns to jerking and she’s coming beneath Sam, grabbing onto her back and shoulders and hair as she arches and undulates through her pleasure.

When Cat goes still, Sam holds her close, unable to stop grinning. She breathes deeply, taking in the scent of her, feeling Cat’s joy and satisfaction mingle with her own, feeling connected to her, despite their lack of shared kinship with the moon. It’s something Sam had wondered about, if sex with Cat would be very different, because she isn’t a werewolf. But as she lifts her head to kiss Cat, who seems to gradually be coming back to herself after her orgasm, she knows that she feels that same primal sense of bonding she felt with Carly, a very human connection, and that the presence of her wolf side only seems to enhance it, even without an answering bestial presence on the other side.

“That was amazing,” Cat mumbles when she finally seems able to speak. Her hand is gentle against the side of Sam’s face, caressing her, brushing her hair back, gazing at her with deep affection. With *love*. A love that has been brewing between them for far longer than either of them were willing to admit.

“You’re amazing,” Sam replies, not even caring how corny a truth it is when she has someone she loves so much in her arms.

Cat’s expression slowly shifts into something more sly. “We’re not done, though,” she purrs.

Sam tries to husk back, “Oh, yeah?” but she stutters through it, blushing at her own eagerness.

Cat hadn't entirely been sure what losing her virginity was going to be like. Which, she realizes that to some people, what just happened probably wouldn't count, but she knows that, for her, this is absolutely sex. It's intentionally sex, it's about pleasure and connection and *love* and, really, it's a profoundly meaningful experience. It feels very *special*, to give someone else such intimate access to her body, to let someone else give her pleasure as an expression of love for her. Cat loves it, feels all sorts of feelings that, while not entirely new, she is feeling them on a scale that she hasn't experienced before.

But as she recovers in Sam's arms, she also realizes...how little has changed. And also that... there was no catastrophe, no smiting by a vengeful god, no emotions too intense for Cat to handle, nothing about the experience that she regrets in any capacity.

Her feelings for Sam are the same, if not stronger. Sam is not on her way out the door, certainly doesn't seem to have lost an ounce of respect for her. She marvels, then, at how she could have believed for so long that something that brought two people so close together and created so much joy could be so wrong. And, she considers, now that they've passed this milestone of *first time* together, there is very little to stop them from having their second, and third.

Except that their first time isn't even over yet. Because Cat wants to know what it will feel like to touch Sam, too.

She informs Sam of this, and watches the way Sam's brain seems to short-circuit at the suggestion that her pleasure is Cat's next priority. It makes Cat laugh softly. She never knew laughter could be so much of a part of sex, but each time it happens, it only seems to make their love shine brighter.

Cat bites her lip, uncertain where to start. There's no reason to vocalize that this is new to her, she doesn't really know what she's doing...Sam knows all that. It doesn't seem to dampen her eagerness as she gazes down at Cat, expression soft, eyes affectionate.

Cat starts by rolling over on top of Sam, switching their positions. Having Sam on top of her before had made her feel cocooned, even in her intense and delicious vulnerability, as if Sam's presence was as protective as it was sensual. And here, with Sam naked beneath her, Cat takes a moment to appreciate their reversed positions, to take in Sam beneath her, eyes deep and dark like a twilight sky, hair wild, skin flushed and soft and so easily accessible to Cat.

It's exciting, and overwhelming, and Cat sits back a little, letting herself take in the sight of Sam. It isn't the first time she's seen her naked, of course, not by a long shot, but...it's the first time she's seen her naked during *sex*. And it makes the experience entirely different.

She both hears and sees the way Sam's breath picks up as Cat looks at her, proof that she, too, acutely feels the difference in this moment.

She reaches out a hand to gently palm one of Sam's breasts, catching the way it makes her exhale. Sam is trembling slightly, but Cat has a sense that it isn't simply from arousal, she thinks it's largely from *impatience*. But despite that certainty, Cat doesn't feel rushed, and she meets Sam's eye to grin at her as her fingers trail down her body.

It makes Sam's breath catch, and Cat is tempted to prolong the suspense, to make Sam wait a little longer to be touched, but truth be told, Cat doesn't want to wait, either. Cat gave herself a moment, and she's ready to know what it's going to feel like to make love to Sam Puckett.

She leans forward to kiss Sam, adjusting the angle of her hand as her fingers take a direct path down Sam's stomach, past her waist, and directly between her legs. She feels Sam groan against her lips as her fingers make contact, feels *her*, warm and slick and, for a moment, incomprehensible, as Cat attempts to orient her touch in unfamiliar terrain. Cat's eyes are closed, and she realizes belated she's stopped kiss Sam as she attempts to concentrate on touching her, and then realizes she's stopped moving her fingers as the reality of *touching Sam*, the subject of so many fantasies over the past few months, washes over her, and Cat almost can't believe it's happening.

But it is. It's *her* touch making Sam breathe like that in Cat's ear, making Sam's fingers grasp onto her back, desperate touches, making Sam's hips lift, trying to help orient her, though at this point, it simply throws Cat off.

As Cat resumes kissing Sam, she feels Sam's hand, joining hers, gently moving her hand in a way that makes Sam whimper before drawing her hand away, leaving Cat with implicit guidance that she follows, feeling Sam move beneath her.

But as much as Cat is certainly invested in Sam's pleasure, she also wants the chance to explore a little more, to learn more about Sam's body, what gives her pleasure.

There's no real elegant way to say what she wants, though Cat does struggle with the words. Finally, she manages to whisper in Sam's ear, "I want to know what it feels like to be inside you."

A shiver runs through Sam. "I want you to."

Cat takes a deep breath as her fingers move, and moans aloud, a breathy whine, the moment she slips one finger inside of her girlfriend. She's had plenty of opportunities to imagine what this might be like, but the reality almost overwhelms her, filling her chest with giddiness and awe, dizzy with the headiness of Sam's vulnerability, patience and love, feeling a small part of herself entirely enveloped in *Sam*.

Sam sighs at the contact, eyelids fluttering, and Cat continues her exploration by moving her finger, watching Sam's face for reactions, trying to learn all the landmarks she can as she maps out Sam's pleasure.

But as deliciously overwhelming as fingering Sam is, it doesn't seem to be something that drives her wild on her own. Cat kisses her gently, then asks, "What feels the best for you?"

Sam gazes up at her, searching her face. "You really want to know?"

"Of course," Cat replies earnestly. She knows they still have so much ground to cover as they explore lovemaking, but at this point, she's ready to refocus on Sam's pleasure, because she wants to finally have the experience of giving Sam an orgasm.

“In that case,” Sam murmurs, and Cat feels a hand pushing at her shoulder, not hard, but with an undercurrent of urgency. “Sit back.” Cat does, sitting back on her heels as Sam sits up, but Sam shakes her head, tugging at Cat’s legs. “Legs long,” she encourages, directions that make little verbal sense to Cat but that she figures out quickly, and sits back, extending her legs in front of her.

With that, Sam quickly straddles one of Cat’s legs, forearms on Cat’s shoulders. Cat wraps her arms around Sam instinctively and moments later, feels the wet warmth of her as she sinks down against Cat’s thigh. “O-oh,” Cat stutters.

“This okay?” Sam asks, voice breathless.

“Yeah,” Cat nods. “Yeah, *very*.”

“Good,” Sam husks, and then her hips begin to sway, and she’s grinding against Cat’s leg. Cat digs her heel into the mattress, lifting her thigh to push back against Sam, making Sam’s eyes roll back as she meets Cat’s enthusiasm, and then she’s leaning forward to kiss Cat messily.

But as much as she loves kissing Sam, it’s difficult to ignore the fact that her breasts are kind of *right there*, in Cat’s face, soft and full and something Cat has long noticed about Sam, and even if she’s had weeks to get *very* familiar with them, Cat doesn’t think she’ll ever get enough of them.

She shifts the focus of her mouth from Sam’s lips to her chest, and Sam seems to shift hers to the rhythm of her hips, and Cat hears Sam react to the attention she pays to her breasts, hears the way groans interrupt her rhythmic panting breaths as she thrusts against Cat with fervor, with enthusiasm, and Cat once again feels the power in Sam’s body as they make love, her energy and focus and determination trained on the connection between their bodies. She whimpers as emotions wash over her, as if the act itself is literally *creating more love* to be put out into the universe, channeled through the physicality of pleasure, until Sam begins to jerk and spasm against her, clinging to her, guttural groans pouring from her mouth as she climaxes, and Cat can feel her trembling all over with the force of it.

Slowly, carefully, Cat guides Sam to lie down next to her on the bed. They’re facing the wrong way on the bed at this point, but neither of them really care. Sam is still clinging to her, face pressed against her chest as she shakes, and Cat strokes her hair.

“I love you,” Cat murmurs, and though it isn’t a new statement, it still feels like a revelation to say aloud.

It seems to make Sam quake harder for a moment, and finally Sam responds in a thick voice. “I love you so much.”

“Sam...are you crying?” Cat asks, tone more curious than accusatory.

“Of course not,” Sam growls back.

Cat is pretty certain she's lying. But she lets her have it, holding Sam against her chest until she regains her composure and shows her face again.

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They fool around for most of the rest of the evening. The wolf side of Sam still has a lot of energy to burn through, and even with the intensity she'd focused on Cat, and her own orgasm, she'd held back a good deal, not wanting to overwhelm or hurt Cat during her first time. But even as they explore a little bit more that first night, Sam is able to let a little more of her rougher, wild side out, which seems to utterly delight Cat.

Eventually, they pull apart to half-heartedly work on homework, accomplishing at least the minimal assignments necessary, and Sam is ready for another meal (even though they'd already had dinner that night) before they head to bed.

It's hard to fall asleep, when all they want to do is keep touching each other, but eventually they do, probably from pure exhaustion more than a decision to stop exploring pleasure together.

The next morning, it's just as difficult to get out of bed, and though they don't *actually* accomplish morning sex, they spend enough time lingering to be late for school. Which isn't a huge deal; Sam knows that as long as Cat makes it to school, she's fine, and Sam herself isn't that worried about logging into her online classes late, either.

But it does mean that the first time she sees Tori is during morning break, at her locker.

"Nice of you to ditch us last night." Tori narrows her eyes, but the playful smile on her lips gives away her true mood.

"Yeah, sorry about that, something came up," Sam replies, her apology about as sincere as Tori's annoyance.

Tori chuckles, "Yeah, that's exactly what Cat said." She pauses, as if waiting for Sam to elaborate, but Sam doesn't, so she continues, "Are we at least still on for the park on Friday night?"

"Yeah, of course," Sam assures her, because she does value her time out in nature with Tori as a wolf, and she needs that opportunity to let her wolf roam. Something else occurs to her, though. "Do you need to pick up wolfsbane at all?" she asks.

Tori tilts her head to the side. "We can almost always use some at my house," she replies. "Why, are you out already? I thought you bought a six month supply."

"I did, but last night I needed to take it in a hurry, so I used that freebie tincture I got, and, uh, let's just say I liked the effect."

Sam can feel that her cheeks get warm at the admission, and Tori's eyebrows rise as she notices. "Oh," she says simply, and then her eyes wide, "*Oh*," she utters, a grin spreading over her face. "You and Cat?" she asks in a low, eager voice.

“Who *else* would it be?” Sam scoffs.

“No, I know, I just mean...” Tori gropes for words, “I just knew she hadn’t yet. Until last night?”

“Yep,” Sam confirms, feeling her own smile match Tori’s.

“Oh, my god, good for you guys!” Tori enthuses, “That’s wonderful.” Her eyes take on a distant quality as she smiles. “One of the first times that Jade and I kind of...” she doesn’t complete the sentence, but instead says, “I had to use a tincture that night, too. Because I didn’t have much time. And it is...*heady*.”

“So you see why I want more,” Sam replies bluntly.

Tori laughs. “Oh, definitely. Want to go after school today?”

“Let’s do it,” Sam agrees, turning just as Tori’s gaze looks past her head in time to see Jade and Cat walking together, approaching them. Cat flings herself into Sam’s arms and kisses her heartily in greeting, making Sam grunt in surprise. When they pull apart, she can see Tori smiling slyly at them, while Jade frowns, though there’s a glint of affection in her eyes.

“Now that your face isn’t being devoured, hi Sam, so nice of you to not show up last night,” Jade snarks.

Sam sighs, and Tori pokes Jade. “She already apologized to me. They had a good reason.”

“Sure,” Jade drawls, unconvinced.

“It’s true,” Cat pipes up. “We had sex!” she announces, perhaps a little louder than intended in her excitement. Sam feels her cheeks burn, and she sees Jade’s eyes widen in surprise, while Tori presses her lips together to suppress laughter. But Cat just continues on unconcernedly, “I don’t think it would’ve been very nice if we’d done it at Tori’s instead.”

“*Cat*.” Sam isn’t really scandalized, that’s just not what she expected Cat to say.

“What?” Cat looks at her, mischief glittering in her gaze.

“Nothing,” Sam replies, slipping her arm around Cat to pull her close again.

“Looks like you’ve awakened an animal,” Jade remarks, gazing between the two of them fondly.

“No, *Sam* is the animal,” Cat corrects with a smirk.

“*Cat!*”

In a way, it’s nice to see Cat feeling so excited and confident that she’s bragging to her friends about having sex, even as she’s proper enough to keep the details to herself. Sam finds it endearing. And also kinda hot. But, like, *everything* about Cat is hot right now, especially when memories of the night before are so fresh in her mind.

It inspires a steamy makeout session in the janitor's closet during afternoon break. After school, Tori borrows Cat's helmet and rides with Sam to Earth+, while Cat accompanies Jade to get coffee. Once Sam picks up some more tincture, as well as some "energizing" capsules, as Astra calls them, and even decides to try one of the brownies, she rushes back over to meet Jade and Cat so they can hurry home and get naked again.

Sam had intended to have a wolf night in, after sex, but it doesn't quite work out that way. She has no regrets, she just knows she'll have to have a *very* active night in Shadow Creek Park tomorrow night to make up for it. Although these wolfsbane concoctions bring the wolf "closer to the surface," as Astra says, it's not nearly the same thing as actually *being* a wolf and spending time in that form and mind.

After just two days full of sex, Sam is already a bit reluctant to go to the park, knowing that the usual ritual of going straight to Tori's from school to have dinner before leaving for the park all together means that she and Cat really won't have any time to themselves today. But she's also aware of how important this opportunity to wolf out is, so she's able to talk herself out of yet another night of wolfsbane and pleasure.

Cat, though, doesn't make it any easier on her.

"Are you *sure* we can't stay in again?" she murmurs in Sam's ear as they take off their helmets in the school parking lot that morning.

"Cat," groans Sam softly, eyelids fluttering shut in reaction. "I'm sure," she says, trying to sound firm, but her voice wavers.

"Maybe we can find time to slip away together during school," Cat suggests with a wink.

Sam glances at her with some incredulity. "Yeah, I'm not sure that's a good idea," she says slowly. She doesn't know when she became the person who tries to follow rules, but it feels unnatural coming from her.

Cat pouts adorably, but doesn't say anything else, just takes Sam's hand as they walk into school together. They run into Tori and Jade first, who verify *again* that they're *definitely* going to Shadow Creek Park tonight. Sam understands that they're both teasing and trying to ensure they can keep their plans, but it doesn't make their badgering any less annoying.

Though maybe that's her horniness talking, because after what Cat said, she can't keep the idea out of her mind.

By the time it's almost lunch time, Sam can barely pay attention. But also, who cares? School is almost over anyway, and as long as Sam studies for her finals, she should graduate. Also, she's not even a student here, she doesn't pay tuition. What can Hollywood Arts really do to punish her, tell her she can't study in the library anymore? Well...that would kind of suck. But, again, only a few more weeks of school left, anyway.

Besides...Sam knows how to not get caught.

Just before lunch, Sam texts Cat to meet her in the janitor's closet. She closes her computer and leaves her belongings in the library lounge (nobody ever disturbs it; nobody ever seems to be in this part of the library at all except her) and climbs down the trapdoor and into the little closet.

Cat meets her there quickly, slipping into the room. Her eyes are soft, her mouth eager, and she leans against the door, next to the window, grinning shyly. "Did you ask me here to fool around?" she asks.

"No, I asked you here because I thought it would be a great place for a picnic," Sam replies sarcastically, before crossing the tiny room to stand right in front of Cat, whose arms loop around her waist instinctively. "We don't have to do anything," Sam tries, "If you're worried about getting in trouble."

"I'm graduating in a few weeks, what can they do?" Cat asks, almost reckless in her excitement. "Besides, you can hear anyone coming, right?"

"Oh, I'll hear you coming, all right." Sam just can't help herself, even as it makes Cat blush and slap her shoulder. It's something Cat and Carly share, the playful admonishment of Sam when she gets a little crude. At this point, hearing someone say "*Sam!*" like that is practically a turnon on its own. But she pushes past her own comment to actually answer Cat's question. "Right now, there's a lot of activity in the halls, but when everyone starts going outside for lunch, I'll be able to hear."

"Then I guess we'll just have to take it slow while everyone leaves," Cat breathes against Sam's lips, then closes the distance with a kiss.

In spite of Sam's confidence in her ability to keep watch, she realizes quickly how easy it is for her to get lost in intimacy with Cat. It's difficult to focus, maybe because of how eager her wolf side is to come out, or maybe she's just that horny. But after what feels like long minutes of making out, Sam remembers that Cat has been waiting for her to give the all clear that the halls are empty, and Sam finally tunes back into her surroundings. "I think we're alone," she murmurs.

"You think?" Cat questions, hands on Sam's breasts.

Sam groans, low in her throat, and struggles to refocus on the sounds and smells in a busy building. Sensing absence is harder than sensing presence, but she feels pretty confident as she tells Cat, "Yeah."

"Good," Cat murmurs, and tugs Sam even closer, and Sam feels the way her thigh makes purposeful contact between Sam's legs.

Sam stutters out a gasping sound, a moan she chokes off before it can be vocalized. "Fuck, Cat," she whispers, leaning against the door, Cat pressed between her body and the surface.

Cat's hands rest on Sam's hips, encouraging the grinding motion on her thigh. "Kiss me so you'll stay quiet," she whispers, making Sam's knees weak as she obliges.

Sam tries to arrange herself so that her thigh can grind against Cat's, too, but Cat's skirt is in the way, and Cat does not seem inclined to move it. Well, Sam doesn't need much more encouragement to focus on the sensation between her legs. It's not ideal, grinding while standing, through a thick layer of denim, but the riskiness of this, in a space surrounded by so many people that Sam can easily sense, makes this *exciting*, and it doesn't take long before Sam has her open mouth pressed against Cat's shoulder, teeth barely pressing into her flesh, as she breathes out barely suppressed whimpers, hips jerking against her girlfriend's thigh.

She stands up on shaky legs long moments later, blinking blearily at Cat, grinning lazily. "Better?" Cat asks sweetly.

"Yeah," Sam admits. She's pretty sure she chafed a rather delicate part of herself, but it was worth it, especially since that will heal with her transformation tonight. She looks at Cat curiously. "What about you?"

Cat hesitates. "I don't know if I can...get there, like that."

Sam presses one hand against the door, balancing as she leans closer into Cat. "You're wearing a skirt," she points out.

"I know."

"I can touch you. If you want."

Cat bites her lip. "What if we get caught?"

Even though they'd just pretty much been *having sex*, just now, in the closet, Sam understands the question. Actually *touching* Cat like that would be much more difficult to hide, a much more punishable offense than some heavy making out, which they could easily argue is what just happened.

Maybe that's why Cat kept her skirt down, too. Plausible deniability.

But Sam wants to offer her something. "You keep your underwear on," she suggests, "And I won't touch anything under it. Just *through* it."

Cat seems to consider this, and in a moment, Sam feels as her girlfriend grabs her hand and guides it under her skirt, then presses her mouth to Sam's to muffle the sound of her moan.

It's much harder to orient herself through the layer of cotton of Cat's underwear, but Sam manages. And as her fingers move, she feels the evidence of Cat's arousal, even through that layer of cotton, and kisses her harder.

Sam basically forgets about paying attention to their surroundings, but luck is on their side, because she's surprised by how quickly Cat is reduced to gripping onto her and shaking, holding her breath to keep from moaning aloud, hips jolting along with the continued motion of Sam's hand, until Cat sags back against the closet door.

"Better?" Sam smirks, echoing Cat's question smugly.

“Mmhmm,” Cat hums out breathlessly, then presses a comparatively chaste kiss to Sam’s lips. “Now I’m okay with you being a wolf tonight,” she reports cheerfully.

Sam laughs, but the comment also unexpectedly stings a little. “You’re not going to be bored of me being a wolf now that we’re having sex, are you?” Sam asks the question before she has a chance to consider whether she even wants to know the answer. This is another part of what’s different about dating a human. With Carly, there was a mutual need to spend time as a wolf, the ability to manage their time to make sure they had plenty of nights as wolves to satisfy that primal part of them, and plenty of nights on wolfsbane to satisfy the equally primal part of them that longed to press their human flesh together under the powerful light of the full moon. With Cat, maybe Sam’s condition is simply an inconvenience.

But Cat shakes her head rapidly, pressing several reassuring kisses all over Sam’s face. “Of course not!” she states, pain in her voice. “I *love* you as a wolf. I love that I get to experience both parts of you. It’s just.” She blushes deeply. “I wasn’t sure I’d make it through the day if I didn’t have a chance to...you know.”

“I know what you mean,” Sam chuckles, placated by Cat’s reassurances. She kisses her again. “I’m hungry,” she reports, realizing with some surprise that she’d been so focused on Cat and pleasure that she’d barely noticed her empty stomach, which is certainly saying something. “Let me wash my hands and let’s get lunch.”

“Kay kay,” Cat smiles, a blissful expression, and Sam pauses at the closet door for a moment, trying to assess whether anyone will be in the hallway when they come out of the janitor’s closet. It seems clear, so Sam leads the way first to the bathroom, then the two of them head outside to the Asphalt Cafe.

Enough time has passed that there isn’t much of a line at the Grub Truck, so they’re able to grab something quickly and join their friends. Sam notices, though, that as soon as they sit down, conversation stalls, and an air of awkwardness settles over the group.

Finally, Beck says mildly, “Nice of you to join us.” There’s no edge to the tone, but everyone at the table shifts and exchanges glances in reaction.

Sam stares at them all, making her face as dangerously blank as she can, which makes everyone sit up a little straighter. She realizes she and Cat probably should have discussed how they were planning to handle the fact that their absence at the beginning of lunch would obviously be conspicuous.

But Cat manages to sound genuinely confused as she asks, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” Beck’s eyebrows rise as he speaks.

“We just, uh...noticed you were late for lunch!” Robbie adds, clearly trying and failing to match Beck’s unflappable energy, but he’s shiftier.

“Yeah, I guess we were,” Cat answers casually.

So that's how she's planning to play it. Sam can roll with that. She's used to keeping secrets. She starts to eat, figuring if she's busy with her food, there's less she needs to say.

But then Jade leans forward, eyes on Cat. "We were just surprised. You're normally so punctual," she probes. Sam meets her eyes for just a moment, trying to put warning in her gaze, but Jade is clearly far too delighted by this scenario to back down.

"Maybe we had something to do," Cat replies. This makes the entire table snort and stifle laughter, Sam included. Cat frowns. "What do you all want me to say? That we were in the janitor's closet?"

"Oh, we know you were," Jade laughs, sounding smug and delighted.

"Yeah, I...kinda saw you go in there," Tori admits. She shoots an apologetic smile at Sam. "I should've kept my mouth shut."

"It's fine," Cat replies, "Since you're all *so* interested. I'll just say I'm glad I had a chance to be in there like that before I graduated. Tori and Jade sure know how to pick a good spot." She smirks as she turns it around on them.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Jade lies, as smoothly as ever.

Andre shakes his head. "Can we talk about *anything* else? Look, I'm happy for all of you, and I'm used to being the third wheel, but right now I'm like the *seventh* wheel, and that kind of sucks."

"Sorry, Andre," Tori places a friendly hand on his shoulder.

He waves a hand. "Don't apologize. I have a date this weekend, so I won't be lacking for long."

A chorus of *oohs* rise up from the table and everyone begins asking Andre about his mystery date. As he shares details and pictures of yet another gorgeous woman he's rapidly fallen madly in love with (Sam has seen this enough to realize it's a pattern for the guy), she hears Robbie murmur to Beck, "Should we, you know...try to fool around in the janitor's closet before we graduate?"

Beck's eyes shift around the table. Sam keeps her own eyes blandly focused on Andre. Then, Beck murmurs, "Only if we don't announce it to this entire table."

"That's fine with me," Robbie exhales in relief.

Maybe Sam identifies with that. She spent so long with Carly, keeping everything about their relationship a secret. She knows that all of this is a first for Cat—first relationship, first love, first sex—and she can understand Cat wanting to share with her friends. It isn't Sam's instinct, but she respects it.

Maybe she'll get more comfortable with it. This idea of living openly, authentically. Sam already has to keep one giant secret in her life, and maybe it'll be nice to not have to keep details of her relationship a secret anymore.

Though, maybe she should have a talk with Cat that their friends probably don't need to be informed *every* time they have sex. But, baby steps. They're still learning how to navigate intimacy together.

After school, they head to Tori's for some dinner. They navigate the polite indifference of Tori's parents and the sneering disdain of Trina. Sam is so eager for the chance to be a wolf that she honestly pities Trina as she looks at her. She can't imagine being human all the time.

She wouldn't change a thing about herself. And it's a good thing Cat doesn't want her to.

Jade drives them up to the park, and she and Tori slip away into the clearing in the little grove of trees together. By now, Tori has become a little less awkward about stripping in front of each other, and there's a comfortable sort of casualness between them as they take off clothes and set them aside in their preferred areas of the clearing.

"So, did you really do it in the janitor's closet?" Tori asks conspiratorially.

"Kind of a personal question," Sam replies evasively.

"You're right," Tori says quickly.

But Sam kind of can't resist the chance to brag a little. Maybe Cat's openness is rubbing off on her. Heh, rubbing. "But, sort of. Clothes stayed on, nothing *super* scandalous happened, but...we managed."

Tori nods, eyes flashing with mischief and intrigue. "Yeah that's about all you can get away with in there," she replies knowingly.

"So the rumors *are* true?" Sam asks.

"What rumors?" Tori asks innocently.

Sam eyes her impatiently. "The *reputation* you and Jade have with that closet."

Tori smirks slyly. "Well, we try not to rub it in. Because Jade says Beck always talked about fooling around in there, and we didn't want him to know that *we'd* done it when he never got the chance."

Sam wonders if Beck had been so eager for that because he wanted the very reputation Tori and Jade now had. It would have bolstered the *other* closet he was in at the time, giving him a reputation not just as a sexually active guy, but as a straight one. "I don't think you need to worry about his feelings there."

Tori's head whips up. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing," Sam replies cryptically.

Tori narrows her eyes at Sam, but eventually nods. But then her expression shifts to a smirk again. "Well, now that you know the joy of full moon, wolfsbane sex...I'm glad you decided to hang out with me tonight."

Sam hesitates, debating whether to tell Tori that this wasn't her first time, that she and Carly discovered this a *long* time ago, but...maybe that's better left in the past. "Hey, I still want to do this with you every month no matter what," she vows. "I *need* this."

"I know what you mean," Tori lets out a heavy sigh. "But that's good to know. I've gotten used to having a wolf buddy."

Sam smiles. "It is much more fun with a friend," she agrees. In spite of her early friction with Tori, that's all forgotten at this point, especially after the encounter with Sam's mom.

When Sam stopped in Los Angeles, she hadn't expected much, other than a chance to take in the sights she'd missed the last time they'd come down there to, coincidentally, stalk Tori Vega. But what was meant to be a brief stopover turned into an opportunity, and she's found a home, she's found a family, and she's found love.

And within moments, she and her new werewolf best friend (not a replacement for Carly, who, despite being a part of Sam's past, is always a part of her, always someone special to her) are changing before one another's eyes, and then running out of the trees to find their lovers, to play and bond and spend a night beneath a luminescent moon, happy and free and content, graduation and a full summer open in front of them.

Chapter End Notes

Part 3 of the series will start posting in a few days!

End Notes

Title from Purity Ring, "Stardew"

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